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THE TRUTH ABOUT A NUNNERY

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THE STORY OF FIVE YEARS
IN A PARIS CONVENT SCHOOL

BY

MARION AYESHA

SPECIAL EDITION

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PREFACE

THE Convent of the following pages had its first home and mother-house near Paris. Within its walls many Royalties and members of the 'Haute Noblesse' of Europe have been educated. From 1838 to 1900 some twenty-five local houses also were opened in France, England, Spain, Italy, and Belgium—though I make no mention of English houses or nuns in this story. In 1889 Leo XIII raised the Congregation to the dignity of an Order, and approved the Constitutions. In 1905 the French Republic turned the whole Order out of the country, because they considered that it was teaching children to despise and ridicule the Government under which they lived.

In 1889 I—a girl of nineteen at the time, one of a numerous family—was sent there by my mother, who, having her hands already full with three pretty daughters, did not want to be bothered with a fourth ugly one. I stayed in the Order—sometimes in one house, sometimes in another—for five years, as pupil, lady boarder, novice, and professed novice of temporal (two years') vows. I relate in full all the details of these five years, ever keeping the comical side uppermost, because it is the side that most appealed to me.

The sole merit of the story lies in the fact that it is an absolutely unique description of convent life. The reader will not find in it weird stories of walled-up nuns, of starved prisoners covered with festering sores, or of slaughtered infants buried in the cellar. The Roman Catholic nun is painted only as what she often is—a conceited, ridiculously self-satisfied, but harmless and kindly old maid.

A Catholic editor would refuse this story because I have not represented the consecrated Virgin of his Church as simply an Angel of Light; while a Protestant editor might refuse it because I have not painted her as an infamous Jezebel of the lowest type. Unfortunately, neither Protestant nor Catholic editors stop to consider that real human nature is neither quite black nor quite white; that truth, no matter how dull, is ten thousand times more interesting than the most incredible fiction; and that exaggerated portraits of human nature are likely only to pall upon the reader.

In this work there is no fiction, no romance, but unadorned truth. There is no plot, for real life is not usually based upon a systematically worked-out plot. All the people named in the story have existed, and nearly all of them still exist. The names alone are fictitious.

As a last word, I should wish my readers to understand that the book must in no sense be taken as an attack upon the sincere convictions of any religious person, whether nun or otherwise; it is simply my own picture of a certain side of life as I saw it.

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PART I
AS A PUPIL

CHAPTER I

'Au milieu des plus beaux ombrages
Un monastère est situé ;
Le rossignol dans le feuillage
Chante des séjours embaumés.
Tout y respire l'allégresse,
La joie et l'animation ;
Le cœur tout rempli de tendresse,
Nous célébrons notre cher couvent.
Si Charlemagne savait
Comme nous nous amusons,
Il ressusciterait
Pour bénir l'Incarnation.'

THESE joyous words, sung by sweet girlish voices, greeted us the moment the concierge, standing at the door of her pretty rose-embowered lodge, admitted us to the sacred precincts. At least they were reassuring. What was good enough for Charlemagne might surely satisfy so unimportant a person as I knew myself to be. The concierge, a young and comely woman of the working classes, arrayed with the neat coquetry that characterises even the poorest Parisian woman, having politely asked us our business, pointed to the big grey building that stood massive, stately, imposing, before us. We crossed the semi-circular courtyard,

which might easily accommodate over a dozen carriages, and entered the house, or rather the mansion, by an open portal, to find ourselves at the foot of a wide stone staircase. We prepared to ascend it, when a voice close to our ear arrested our progress. Hastily we turned and saw a fat jovial face peering at us through an aperture in the wall.

The voice resumed: 'Ah! I see you are the English gentleman who was to bring us his niece. If Monsieur and Mademoiselle will give themselves the trouble to go upstairs I will inform Madame la Supérieure of their arrival.'

Then Fat-face disappeared, having favoured us with a parting smile of welcome and encouragement. We undoubtedly needed the latter, at least I know I did, and as for poor Uncle Julius, a warm-hearted, simple-minded and somewhat untidy bachelor of forty-five, who knew nothing of women and still less of nuns, I could read in his eyes that he looked forward to the interview with that dreaded, mysterious personality, termed Madame la Supérieure by Fat-face, with much the same feelings as a mediæval prisoner looked forward to his admittance inside the torture-chamber.

At the head of the stone staircase we found the folding doors hospitably open, and walked straight into an apartment of palatial dimensions with inlaid floor waxed to the brightness of a mirror, four foot high oaken panels, and a superb oaken fire-place magnificently carved. Some four dozen high-backed oaken chairs stood about the huge apartment without overfilling it, and in the centre a massive oaken table of antique form in which the

most inexperienced eye could detect an article of great value. On this table, also polished to excessive brightness, lay several priceless volumes bound as éditions-de-luxe, massive gilt inkstands, and Russian leather writing-cases—and some excellent copies of old masters representing scenes from the life of our Redeemer. Nothing gaudy, nothing cheap! A stately apartment in very truth.

‘Looks something like the throne-room at Windsor,’ I murmured; to which my uncle returned:

‘More like a palace than a convent.’

Five windows facing south stood open to let in the faint breeze, laden with the scent of countless blossoms on that radiant June afternoon. We approached the middle window and gazed on a beautiful park, which seemed to end in a sea of green foliage. Of neighbouring houses, factories, chimney tops no glimpse; of street traffic no sound. Could we possibly be in great restless Paris? Velvet lawns, made gay by multi-coloured flowers, spread far beyond our vision. Wide-spread oaks, elms, chestnut trees afforded cool shade on the hottest day. A sparkling sheet of clear blue water, encircling a green islet joined to the mainland by a rustic bridge, gave the scenery a sylvan appearance. Some five or six gardeners, the head one being probably the pretty lodge-keeper’s husband, worked busily at different parts, and far away in a shady alley planted with chestnut trees could be seen the slim black-clad figures of some thirty young girls, who with joined hands formed a circle and went round and round, still singing the delights of their convent and Charlemagne’s probable appreciation thereof.

‘It’s all very well for Charlemagne,’ I grumbled, ‘I only wish he could come and take my place.’

‘Now really, Marion,’ expostulated my uncle wearily, who, since the moment he fetched me from my Magdeburg school forty-eight hours previously, had vainly endeavoured to raise my spirits; ‘you take too gloomy a view of your position. Surely no one could be utterly miserable in such a paradise. I’d rather like to stay and be a nun myself.’

‘But not I! I don’t want to be a nun or a Catholic. Is it right, is it fair to put a young woman of nineteen in such a place against her will? Say, Uncle Ju, ought mother to treat me thus?’

My uncle looked timorously round, as if he feared that his sister, then enjoying the height of the London season, might hear him. Then he answered as he had answered dozens of times since we met at Magdeburg:

‘No, she has no right. But what can you do, my poor girl? You know you are helpless in her hands.’

The sound of an opening door arrested my answer, and I turned to see my uncle bowing low before the charming apparition that seemed to glide towards us over the polished floor.

Before continuing I must explain how I, a young Protestant girl in her twentieth year, should be entering a convent school at a time when other young girls are on the eve of marriage.

I was the daughter of a well-to-do London stock-broker, and the fifth of ten children. My mother, who had given all her love to the other nine pretty, attractive children, had little or none left

for me, the ugly duckling of the family. From the moment I learnt to stand alone her one anxiety had been to rid herself of me. So at the age of four I entered a boarding-school. From that tender age until I reached my nineteenth birthday I wandered from one continental school to another—from Brussels to Paris, from Paris to Brunswick, from Brunswick to Magdeburg. Sometimes I found myself among Jews, sometimes among Moravians. Then, again, I dwelt with Atheists, to leave them for Lutherans. But never had I come across Roman Catholics during my fifteen years' wandering. During that time I rarely went home for the holidays, and my mother utterly forgot my existence except on quarter-day, when school-bills came to remind her of her worse than orphaned little daughter.

After my nineteenth birthday she at last realised that I could not be kept at school indefinitely. For several months she worried and wondered how to rid herself of me for good and all, when one day she heard of a young Protestant girl who, dazzled by the pomp and glitter of some convent chapel ceremony, went over to Rome and entered a nunnery. My mother on hearing this may have shouted 'Eureka!' At any rate she permitted no grass to grow under her feet. She had read all about convents, very useful places indeed, where young women not wanted by their friends could be warehoused till death on payment of a reasonable sum. 'The very thing for Marion,' she told herself. 'Before she is a year at the Incarnation she'll be wanting to wear the pretty

habit, and take part in the gorgeous ceremonies. So my uncle was despatched to convey me from my Lutheran German school to a Catholic French convent. I cried, I expostulated, but all in vain. Utterly devoid of self-reliance, childish and easily led like all girls who have spent their whole lives in the subjection of strict boarding-school discipline, I submitted from sheer helplessness, thus finding myself on this radiant June afternoon in the parlour of the nuns of the Incarnation of Neuilly, notably the smartest, most up-to-date, richest community in Europe.

Turning from the parlour window I eagerly scanned the new-comer, and certainly hers was an interesting personality. She appeared to have stepped out of some mediæval cloister, and reminded me of Hroswitha, Walburga, Mechtilde. To myself I murmured a few lines of Longfellow's 'Golden Legend,' as she prayed my uncle to be seated and took a chair opposite him.

Tall, with a long ascetic face, she may have been thirty or thereabouts. Her habit suited her to perfection—a loose violet gown pleated to the waist and falling in graceful folds to the feet, a white cross sewn on the breast, a thick silk cord of the same hue as the gown artistically fastened round the waist and falling in front, to end in two tassels just at the hem of the dress. At her left side a long rosary made of olive beads jangled pleasantly with each step she took and terminated in a crucifix of white ivory and ebony wood. Her face was enframed by a snow-white wimple, reaching to the top of the cross on her breast, and on the

head, falling in graceful folds to her waist, a white veil made of some very thin soft woollen material. On the fourth finger of her left hand she wore a plain gold ring engraved with the initials of her Heavenly Spouse. A charming smile played round her mouth, and all her movements betrayed the refined, high-bred gentlewoman. For all my future prison appeared hateful to me, I could but admire her as I admired the lovely grounds and sumptuous parlour.

She greeted me with a few friendly words to which I politely responded. She praised my French accent, and when I explained that I had already spent three years in a Paris school she asked my age. On hearing that I had just accomplished my nineteenth year she looked surprised, and told me that in France young girls generally left school before they were seventeen. She explained that Madame la Supérieure being unavoidably detained she came instead, for all she was but the mistress of the 'Moyenne Classe,' while I should naturally be placed in the 'Grande Classe' to find myself among many charming companions such as the daughters of the Duchess de Courcelles, the Marchioness of Bethunes' niece, a cousin of the Duc d'Alençon, a relative of the Duchess of Montpensier. She named in endless succession some of the greatest names of France, Spain, Belgium, and Austria. It seemed as if the school could produce not a single pupil lower than the rank of Baroness. Among such a select crowd I, the daughter of an obscure London City man, would feel very 'bourgeois' and humble, as well I

might. My uncle listened with polite interest, although I noticed a merry twinkle lurking in the corner of his eye. In England we consider it somewhat in bad taste to talk of our titled friends and acquaintances, so I marvelled to hear this refined French gentlewoman commit such a breach of the 'convenances.'

The conversation lagged, for my uncle not being on speaking terms with duchesses or even with the wives of lord mayors and aldermen, could not very well talk about that 'salt of the Earth.' At last, to the poor fellow's intense relief, Madame Madeleine du Saint Sépulchre rose with the remark that we ought not to keep Monsieur any longer, that he needed a few hours' rest if indeed he intended returning to London that same evening. Having bowed to him she turned discreetly away to allow me to make my farewells without witnesses, possibly conjecturing that I might give way to tears and home-sickness. She need not have feared, I knew naught of home-sickness. Having lived in Continental boarding-schools from the age of four, home, mother, family were but empty words to me. I had never known or possessed them.

Uncle Julius kissed me kindly, whispering in my ear that when we next met I should have grown too proud to acknowledge him after living under the same roof with the highest aristocrats in Europe. He then bowed once more to the graceful figure in the background, and taking up his hat, went out by one door, while the nun motioned me to follow her through another. We traversed a long arched cloister, its walls painted with life-size

scenes from the Nativity and Passion. Opposite the painted walls, Gothic windows looked out on a beautifully laid-out quadrangle, behind which stretched a well-timbered wood, also belonging to the convent which stood completely surrounded by its own grounds, comprising some hundred acres and more.

But the lovely woods, the Gothic cloister, the green quadrangle, the lordly park (the Allée des Marronniers excepted) were exclusively reserved to the nuns, the pupils only passing through on their way to the parlour and on other state occasions as my companion hastened to inform me, at the same time opening a green baize door and pushing me through with the intimation that we were now in the 'Pensionnat.'

I looked around. Everything clean, spacious, well-aired, well-kept. But the holy nuns, in spite of their vow of poverty, had undoubtedly the best of the bargain. Their patrician pupils fared neither better nor worse than thousands of English and German school-girls of the upper middle classes. We emerged by a small side door into the park and found ourselves in a broad alley planted on either side by superb chestnut trees, and terminating in a wide circle planted with the same trees.

'This,' said Madame Madeleine, 'is the pupils' playground. The "Moyennes," my children, have the alley. You big ones use the "Rond."'

'And the rest of the park?' I queried tentatively, as I peeped through the thick foliage at the lovely scenery beyond.

'The park is reserved to the holy community.'

You must hasten to take the veil, then you can join the saintly nuns.'

I noticed now and hereafter, that the good ladies never spoke of themselves but as the saintly nuns, the holy brides of Jesus, the consecrated Virgins of the Lord, the pure holocausts for the sins of the world. Modesty was undoubtedly their strong point.

We soon came up to a group of girls in their early teens. They still went round and round with joined hands, singing monotonously. Outside the circle stood a young nun dressed like the one that accompanied me, with the difference that her veil was of cotton and she wore no white cross on the breast nor ring on the finger. She was, I learnt later, a novice who had not yet pronounced her temporary vows. She watched the children under her care with Argus eyes. Did one stop singing to make a remark to a neighbour, she pounced on the unlucky culprit as if the latter had committed a crime. I gazed at the children with intense surprise. Were these the representatives of France's noblest families? In their plain black uniforms, consisting of bodice and skirt joined at the waist and a black cape completely hiding shoulders and breast, with their hair tightly braided, they looked like charity school children. Indeed, the Guildford Street Foundlings are far more tastefully robed.

We passed them in silence to join my own class, consisting of girls of fifteen to seventeen and dressed like their juniors. Here Madame Madeleine left me after saying a few words to the

novice in charge, and placing me under the care of a girl who wore a big silver medal on her breast. This medal, oval and massive, was attached to a broad pale blue ribbon passed over her shoulders and pinned to her cape behind. The 'Grandes,' who at our arrival had been playing croquet in a somewhat desultory fashion, now surrounded the novice with their watches held before her face.

'The quarter, give the signal, *ma mère*,' they cried in chorus.

The novice, having consulted her own time-keeper, complied by clapping her hands. Instantly mallets, hoops, and balls were cast aside, and the girls, forming groups of eight or ten, walked round and round the leafy circle chatting as only school-girls can. In each group a girl wearing the broad blue ribbon placed herself, and the novice, twirling slowly round in the centre, watched each child as if her salvation depended on it, pouncing on any two she caught holding private conversation just as the novice on guard over the juniors had done.

'No "apartes," *mes enfants* ! Join the general conversation,' came her repeated cry, followed by: 'Léonie de Vendôme, Yvonne de la Howarderie, Nicole de Chateauroux, I shall really have to give you a bad mark if I catch you whispering together again.'

I stood silent, observant, perplexed, at the place where Madame Madeleine had left me, and beside me stood the girl to whose care I had been entrusted. She introduced herself; Jacqueline d'Herblay. Ever athirst for information and finding myself in surroundings so utterly different from what I

had been accustomed to, I plied her with questions. She answered me willingly, as if she enjoyed being cross-examined.

‘The blue ribbon she wore? Oh, she belonged to the Congregation des “Enfants de Marie.” Truly a glorious privilege to be a child of Mary! Only such pupils as during three years distinguished themselves by their piety, their religious zeal, their observance of the rules, could aspire to such an honour. But if the children of Mary had privileges, they had also duties. For them to watch over other pupils, to listen to their conversation, to report their disobediences to the nuns. Indeed, this was a peculiarity of the convent which I noticed in the school and still more later on in novitiate and community. If we were expected to confess our own sins one day in the week, we were also expected to confess our neighbour’s sins on the seven hebdomadal days. The girls wearing narrow purple ribbons, my informant went on, were aspirants of the children of Mary, who, after one year of fervent piety and exemplary behaviour, might hope to be admitted among the elect few.

Our conversation was again interrupted by the masonic cry: ‘Le signal, ma mère, le signal.’ Ma mère obeyed and immediately benches were brought from a neighbouring arbour and placed in a square. The forty girls rushed for seats, continuing their conversation as if their lives depended on it, while Jacqueline, seated beside me, explained that we had two recreations a day of one hour each. During the first three-quarters of each

hour it was obligatory to 'faire la ronde,' i.e. to go round and round in a circle singing convent ditties. During the last quarter the pupils might talk, walking for seven minutes, sitting for the last seven minutes. But the conversation must be general and carried on in such a way as to be overheard by the children of Mary, whose duty consisted in distributing themselves equally among the others. For two children not wearing ribbons to be caught whispering together or to carry on a private friendship constituted a most grievous sin.

'But why?' I asked, perplexed. 'Why cannot two friends have a little private chat during play-time, provided they don't waste their study hours in idle gossip?'

Jacqueline looked aghast. 'Private chat!' she gasped. 'Where have you been brought up? If they are allowed private chats how can we hear what they say? For what else have we been made "Enfants de Marie" but to report the doings and conversation of our schoolmates to Madame la Supérieure?'

'Oh!' said I, putting a volume of meaning into that one little word. But Jacqueline remained blissfully unconscious of it, and just then the novice came running up and turned to her with imploring gesture.

'Oh, Jacqueline, I beg of you to go and separate Gabrielle de Rochechouart and Yolande de Bracieux. They have been whispering together during the whole recreation.'

Jacqueline jumped up looking as important

and self-conscious as if the whole responsibility of European politics rested on her shoulders. I watched her sandwich herself between two extremely pretty girls of fifteen, vraies types de Parisiennes. Their roguish faces lighted up with suppressed amusement as they began mysterious whispering behind Jacqueline's back, in spite of her frantic endeavours to bring them to a sense of the respect due to her ribbon. Their conversation was just about as dangerous and vicious as that of two babies seated on the floor sucking their thumbs or playing with their toes while they coo into each other's faces. But I soon discovered that the greatest delight of the unberibboned, unregenerate ones consisted in giving the decorated elect as much unnecessary trouble as possible, both parties evidently enjoying the process to their utmost.

Mesdemoiselles Gabrielle and Yolande having received their well-deserved bad mark, the conversation at last became really general, much too general to please me, when I found myself in the centre of it. For the first time since Madame Madeleine brought me, the girls noticed my presence and put me through my paces in a way which, if frankly inquisitive, could scarcely be termed aristocratic.

'Hé, new girl,' called out my vis-à-vis. 'What's your name and where do you come from?'

I briefly informed her. I didn't want to talk about myself, being far too interested in them. They repeated my Christian name several times, pronouncing it French fashion.

‘Marion! What a queer name. There is no Saint Marion in the calendar.’

To the French Catholic her name is of the greatest importance. They keep their name’s day as we keep birthdays, and not to possess a patron saint is nearly as bad as being an unbaptized heathen. They looked at me with pity and contempt till one cried out:

‘Why, there was a Marion Delorme in the reign of Louis XIII, a wicked, wicked woman.’

‘Just so,’ I answered demurely. ‘She is my holy patron.’

These words were received with a cry of horror. Expecting a theological discussion, I put myself on the defensive, determined to hold my own. The girls, however, brushed religious topics aside to discuss more worldly matters.

‘You are from Londres? Bah, une Anglaise! This morning Madame Cécile des Sept Douleurs told me she was expecting a German girl.’

I mentioned my Magdeburg school. At the name of this historical old town a cry of execration rose to the cloudless sky. If the word Anglaise had held a world of contempt, that of Prussienne was hissed through the teeth with such loathing as to prove that after twenty years these children, not born at the time, had not forgotten Sedan.

Being staunch British, continental squabbles left me cold. I was about to subside yawningly into the background when I caught sight of a young German girl of about sixteen. I knew the type too well to be mistaken; I had lived eight years among her kind. She looked annoyed,

distressed, angry; but to my surprise and somewhat to my indignation did not attempt to take up the cudgels 'fürs theure Vaterland.' On nearer inspection, however, I believed I understood her cowardly reticence. The poor child wore the aspirant's ribbon, so dared not quarrel with the 'mighty six' for fear of losing a precious vote at the next elections. I, who aspired to nothing at all, immediately decided to fight her battles.

'You don't like Prussians,' I said casually to the descendants of the 'Vieille Noblesse' who sat around me, 'because they gave you a good thrashing. Well! you only got what you asked for. Had you minded your own affairs when Spain offered her crown to that German What's-his-name, Wilhelm would never have been crowned at Versailles.'

Then they informed me in terms more forcible than polite, and all speaking at once, what they thought of Kaiser Wilhelm der Erster who sat on the imperial throne in those days. The epithets they applied to that harmless old gentleman, whose side-whiskers always appeared to me his chief characteristic, were so virulent that, compared to him, Domitian, Caligula, and Nero might be likened to virtuous maiden aunts and assiduous chapel members. Then some one inquired whether I liked 'cet horreur de Bismarck.' I nodded indifferently, too bored to discuss him. At this the forty girls eyed me aghast. 'She's in love with Bismarck, ma mère; the new Anglaise is in love with Bismarck,' they gasped in chorus.

Now this sounded highly improper, as the old

Frau Fürstin still lived in those days. I prepared to explain the platonic state of my affections, when a distant bell interrupted me. The novice, springing to her feet, clapped her hands with the repeated cry : ' En rang, mes enfants, en rang et en silence.' The beribboned pupils obeyed with alacrity, the unberibboned reprobates slowly and chatting still, but in low voices. Jacqueline pulled me into the ranks, and I found myself standing beside the German girl. She looked at me gratefully. I addressed her in her own tongue. She nodded, smiled, but turned away without answering. I understood, to be caught talking in the ranks to a new-comer and in a foreign tongue would have given the death-blow to all her aspirations. We were marched back to our spacious schoolroom where our class-mistress, Madame Cécile des Sept Douleurs, a hunchback, shrewd-looking woman of thirty, with refined high-bred features, awaited us, seated at the cathedra. She called me to her side, kissed me on both cheeks, traced the sign of the cross on my forehead, and asked my name.

' Marion ! ' she repeated after me with as much surprise as the children had done. ' What a strange name ! ' Well, dear, if you have no objection we will call you Miriam instead. It is the Hebrew name of our Lady, and as one day you will be her child, I hope and pray, we will immediately place you under her most special care.'

She wrote my name and age in a big book, then continued : ' And you were born in June, you say ? The month of the Sacred Heart, you are

indeed a favoured child of Jesus and Mary.' Now go and seat yourself at that empty desk between Renée de Bretagne and Alix de Fontreville. Alix will be able to look after you as she is a child of Mary, and you will probably be placed in the first division with her.'

With these words she dismissed me. A tall, pretty girl wearing the blue ribbon signed to me from the further end of the apartment to come and seat myself beside her. I obeyed. She gave me a French History, bidding me study the reign of François I for that evening's lesson. Silently I did as I was told, and thus my convent life began.

CHAPTER II

To relate my convent experiences day by day would prove tedious ; but I will give an idea of the daily routine, which to English ears will sound incredible. It was such as no English girl possessing a spark of spirit would have submitted. Those who have read anything about Schiller's boyhood at the military college of ' Solitude ' will form an idea of it. We were treated as sternly as military cadets of a by-gone age. Strict silence was exacted Sundays and weekdays alike, except during the last fifteen minutes of each recreation. We were marched in single rank from chapel to dormitory, from dormitory to refectory, from refectory to schoolrooms, from schoolrooms to playground. At the beginning and end of each exercise we knelt in prayer. A thousand times during the twenty-four hours the Pater, the Ave, the Salve Regina were meaninglessly gabbled, while the worshippers stared around and signalled to each other. Ten thousand times a day they brushed themselves over with a queer mystic sign. At first I believed they were chasing flies, for it was summer and very hot ; but soon I gathered that they signed themselves with the holy sign of our redemption.

• • We slept in big dormitories; we older ones had curtained cubicles, the other beds stood separated only by a small washstand, a narrow passage and a chair to close it. At a quarter to six the nun on guard clapped her hands, to which signal the president of the children of Mary answered: 'Je donne mon cœur à Dieu.' The rest of the school, sitting up in bed, gabbled through the responsories. Then followed a hasty toilet, watched over by two novices standing one at each end of the apartment. I fancy that the ablutions of the uncurtained ones must have been somewhat scamped, it being strictly forbidden to uncover oneself. If a child lowered her garment a fraction more than might be deemed necessary, a novice warned her with grave words. She received the reminder that her guardian angel stood watching her and must not be shocked. Now, between ourselves, I do think that it would be more discreet of that celestial gentleman if he sometimes turned his back on the baptised Christian committed to his care, but according to Catholic dogma he stands ever glaring at you. The hasty dressing over, we were marched in rank to the chapel gallery, where we took our seats on high-back benches raised one above the other like in a theatre. The chapel itself was a Gothic gem with painted windows, a beautiful altar with mosaic altar-piece, carved oaken stalls for the nuns, and two charming side chapels, one for visitors, and the other, Our Lady's Chapel, for the humbler lay-sisters.

Mass over we were marched out of chapel, not, as I hoped the first day, to the refectory, but, alas, to the schoolroom, where Madame Cécile, the little

hunchback, awaited us for morning prayers! Again we knelt, again the long meaningless gabble, half in French, half in Latin. We prayed that the direct line of Bourbons might be restored to the throne. (Considering that the Comte de Chambord had already lain in his peaceful grave some years, it is difficult to understand how they expected God Almighty to accomplish so difficult a feat without upsetting the most elementary laws of Nature. Short of resuscitating the old count and his countess and sending them a baby after the fashion of fairy-tale babies, I hardly see how the Legitimists will ever sit on the throne of Saint Louis once more.) We cursed the third Republic wholesale with the words of the Psalmist, in his bitterest and most vindictive moods. We implored Heaven's blessing on the Holy Father; we said good morning to Mary, Joseph, Paul, and Peter, our patron saint, the saint of the day, a few more celestial and purgatorial notabilities and at last—at last, rose to our feet. But yet not breakfast. We seated ourselves and listened, or did not listen, to a short life story of that day's saint. At ten minutes to eight came the signal for the refectory. We had been up two hours, and on our knees the greater part of the time. Rather a Spartanic up-bringing for young aristocrats of whom many are this day leaders of the Parisian 'Grand Monde.' We were marched to the refectory like convicts to the quarries. Here we partook in strict silence of an excellent bowl of chocolate and a crusty French roll, while three lay-sisters respectfully waited on us, and four choir nuns, one seated in the cathedra, three stationed at different

parts of the big hall, watched us as detectives watch a prisoner just arrested for murder. From eight-thirty till midday, the different classes were carried on much as in other schools, but that each one began and ended with lengthy appeals to Jesus and Mary, the Guardian Angel and the saint of the day. At noon an excellent dinner partaken of in rigorous silence, followed by a recreation in which we were forced to play during the first three-quarters of an hour also without speaking. Sewing and study till four, when we received a glass of coffee-tinged water and a roll, with a tablet of chocolate for those who paid for it. No tea; French convents regard tea in the same light as we regard Epsom salts, and only use it as a last remedy in case of obstinate and mysterious diseases. At five Benediction, when the Sacred Host, which was exposed all day and every day in a golden Monstranz amid wax tapers and flowers to the perpetual adoration of nuns who knelt on guard two at a time, was replaced in the Tabernacle. After Benediction, study, supper, recreation, rosary, prayers in which we again prayed for the Bourbons and against the President, for the Pope and against his enemies. We said good night to all our particular celestial and purgatorial friends, and then to bed. Sundays differed in no wise from weekdays, except that we spent longer hours in chapel, wore blue uniforms in honour of the Virgin, and studied religious subjects only. Also our relatives—brothers, male cousins, unmarried uncles under forty excepted—could visit us in the stately parlour from two till four.

It may seem well-nigh incredible that the curled

darlings of Parisian aristocracy should submit thus tamely to a rule against which many of our charity schools would openly rebel. To be closely watched and policed night and day, to have all one's letters read, one's private papers and belongings searched several times a week, to be condemned to a silence nigh as rigorous as that enforced in our prisons, never to be allowed a moment's private conversation with an intimate friend, to be sternly prevented from forming even the purest and most innocent friendship—all this sounds more like the description of an improved Borstal system than of a select house of education exclusively reserved to the patrician classes. Yet these petted little Parisians not only submitted to the convent rule with a good grace, but even loved their prison, loved it dearly and wept bitter tears when the hour of parting arrived.

I entered the Incarnation in the last days of June; barely three weeks separated us from the summer holidays. Already the younger pupils jubilantly counted the days, while—oh surprise!—many of the elder ones went round with glum faces, often weeping copiously in chapel and dormitory. I asked the reason, to be told that they were leaving for good, losing their 'toquade' for ever, poor things! To me this excessive grief appeared inadequate. I wondered in silence, until the ubiquitous Jacqueline, ever at my side, enlightened me.

'Whom have you chosen for your "toquade"?'¹

¹ 'Toquade,' derived from the verb 'toquer,' slang expression for 'being in love.'

she queried at a midday recreation during those blessed fifteen minutes when we might talk—with restrictions.

I requested her to be more explicit. What did the word 'toquade' mean? For all I flattered myself that I spoke the French language fluently, never had I encountered that particular word in any 'lexicon.'

'Who is the nun you are going to worship, to enshrine in your heart? Whom will you choose as your soul's love, or 'toquade,' as we call them?'

I looked to see whether she had a sunstroke; it was a sweltering day. Then I answered, as I pushed the straw hat further over her brow: 'Don't place your hat on the back of your head, Jacqueline. Your brain is not your strong point, and it needs protection. I'm not going to worship any nun; why should I? I see nothing in any of them worth worshipping.'

'Oh!' she cried aghast; then added as an after-thought: 'Is it because you are a heretic that you think nuns wicked?'

'Wicked! Those poor little old maids wicked!' I rejoined contemptuously. 'No, indeed, I do not think them wicked, far from it. They are merely silly.'

'Silly! The Spouses of our Lord! Oh hush! you speak sacrilege.' Then, recalling her onerous duties as member of the secret police force known as the Congregation des 'Enfants de Marie,' she questioned further: 'In what way do you consider them silly?'

'Oh,' I yawned; 'how can I tell? To begin

with, the education even in the first division is most elementary. All the classes are religious lessons more or less disguised. Madame Jehan de la Pucelle's method of teaching history is most absurd. Fancy calling that infamous Alexander VI a saint? Fancy wanting to make us believe that Saint Bartholomew was God's Judgment and perfectly in accordance with the teaching of the Gospel! Then,' I continued, 'in a school of eighty, only eight learn a foreign language. No one studies Latin, Algebra, Euclid, Italian, Political Economy, or Universal History and Literature in their more advanced form. You waste your days gabbling prayers you do not understand, carrying banners and statues round the garden, singing canticles and performing all sorts of silly, empty ceremonies, while no time is left for serious study.'

Jacqueline turned away. 'I will say my beads for you, you poor heretic,' she sighed; 'for you are, I fear, a very wicked girl.'

As I might have expected the matter did not rest there. During the evening study, the class-door opened, and Mère Clara de l'Amour mystique peered in, smilingly, with the request that she would like a little confidential chat with her dear little Miriam. I obediently rose and followed the mistress of the school into the lovely grounds at which I gazed so longingly each day. To wander through that glorious park on a radiant evening in late July was joy indeed.

'And so my little Miriam thinks nuns silly?' gently queried Mère Clara, as we skirted velvet lawns made gay with odorous flower-beds.

It was I who felt silly then, silly and extremely ill-bred, as well I might. I laughed deprecatingly and lamely apologised. 'Oh well, ma mère, you mustn't listen to all that goose of a Jacqueline says. She's a wretched little tale-bearer and mischief-maker.'

'Oh hush, hush!' came the shocked answer. 'You must learn to speak more respectfully of one consecrated to our Lady and especially of such a devout girl as Jacqueline d'Herblay. What I am about to tell you is in strict confidence, mind; and surely it will touch your heart to learn that Jacqueline is constantly praying for you and performing little acts of mortification on your behalf. Last week she actually made the Way of the Cross each day with outstretched arms in order to obtain your conversion from the souls in Purgatory.'

'She would have employed her time much more profitably in learning her lessons,' I ungratefully retorted. 'She is shockingly backward for a girl of seventeen, and in two weeks she leaves school for good. Her education, which to me seems barely begun, will be finished.'

'You consider our education secondary and elementary, I hear?' Mademoiselle d'Herblay had faithfully reported each one of my unguarded words. Finding it useless to prevaricate, I spoke my mind straightforwardly, yet respectfully.

'Ma mère, the pupils of your first division are less advanced than English and German girls of a fourth standard. Then again only eight girls out of eighty study a foreign language. In England, Germany, Switzerland, and Norway, French is

obligatory, even in the baby classes, while nearly every girl who has passed her fourteenth year takes up Latin and a fourth language. Then you teach history from such a one-sided point of view. All your popes, your Catholic kings, your cardinals, your monks are saints, their opponents demons of wickedness. You canonise your Richelieu, because he warred against the Huguenots at La Rochelle, thereby preventing heresy from establishing itself in France, while you pretend to ignore the fact that that scarlet double-faced gentleman sent money to the Lutheran princes to aid them in their contest against Catholic Austria. You represent the Middle Ages as Utopian days when crime and vice were unknown, yet those who have studied history from the tenth to the fifteenth century even in the most superficial way can tell a vastly different story. According to you every Crusader who went out to the Holy Land was a pure angel and martyr, intent only on saving his soul and coming to the rescue of his Christian brethren. Well, read impartial historians and they will tell you what they thought of this crusading gentry, whose manners were often unmentionable and whose morals it is best not to mention at all, at least not in polite society. To conclude, we have some seventeen lessons a week of which about twelve are devoted to Church history, catechism, stories and legends of saints, study of liturgy, Rubriques, and various religious ceremonials, while all the profane subjects have to be scrambled into the remaining five hours. Yes, frankly, I find that French girls of the upper classes are less well-educated than English, Norwegian, or

'German ones. But,' I added deprecatingly, it is not my business to give an opinion unasked. You didn't request me to join your school, and I have behaved with unpardonable ill-breeding in criticising your methods. I did wrong, and I apologise.'

'Not at all, not at all, dear child! You did quite right in speaking your mind to me, but I beg you never again to find fault with the convent or the nuns when conversing with other people; you might do irreparable harm. This time it did not matter, for Jacqueline is so true a child of the Incarnation, so thoroughly imbued with our spirit that she will but pray the harder for your conversion. Promise me, however, that henceforth you will bring me your little difficulties and perplexities.'

I promised. I should have been extremely churlish had I refused; she was so winning, so gracious, so absolutely charming that, in spite of myself, I felt drawn towards her. Gently, sweetly, kindly she answered each one of my objections: 'The aim of the Incarnation is not to make blue stockings, new women, or professors of our children. They leave us to go into the Grand Monde. We seek to make of them refined Society women, true daughters of the Holy Mother Church, ardent Royalists.'

I caught at her last word. 'Royalists! And you think it right to run down your present Government so continually?'

For the first time she became mildly excited. 'Our Government! Do you call that hateful, disgraceful Republic our Government? Do you

expect me to honour an authority, who would rob us of our God, close our churches, snatch the crucifix from the walls, of our national schools, send our clergy into exile? Do you love the French Republic?’

I explained that, being English, I cared nothing for continental republics. Queen Victoria was good enough for me. ‘Yet,’ I argued, ‘whatever a government’s faults may be, children should be taught to respect it. Those girls will be mothers one day, their sons will have to serve their country. How can these young men be reasonably expected to honour and obey an authority their mothers have taught them to despise?’

Mère Clara smiled blissfully. I looked far ahead it seemed to her. Long before these children’s sons reached the age of conscription, a king would sit on the throne of France once more, and the fleur-de-lys replace the hated tricolor. I looked at her pityingly. Such talk from the mouth of small schoolgirls amused and touched me, but from the lips of a mature woman past forty it sounded ridiculous. Did she really imagine that in less than thirty years the French Monarchy would be restored? She did not only imagine it, she informed me, she believed it as an article of faith. ‘Did not God always answer the prayers of his saints?’

‘But what king do you expect to return?’ I queried. ‘The Count de Chambord died last of his race.’

At that name she crossed herself devoutly. Yes! God had called him to His eternal rest—

their great, their good, their holy Henri V. Yet the Orleans still remained, and were they not also sons of St. Louis ?

‘And you actually believe, ma mère, that the Third Republic will follow the second into the land of Have-beens, while in less than three decades the Comte de Paris will emerge from Wood Norton to revive the glories of Compiègne and Versailles ?’

‘I believe it as I believe in God, you doubting little Thomas. Our Catholic France will rise again more glorious than ever from the ashes. “God loves the Franks.” He loves them best among all the nations,’ she concluded, as with a kiss and the sign of the cross on my forehead she dismissed me at the schoolroom door.

‘And so Mère Clara is your “toquade” ?’ whispered several voices in my ear as we were marched in rank to the refectory.

I indignantly protested, yet in vain. In the eyes of the whole school, as in her own, Mère Clara became my adored one. She also directed me, for each pupil had a particular nun assigned to her, who looked more specially after her soul and morals. But Mère Clara was not popular, much to her own grief, poor thing. She did her hardest to gain her pupils’ affection, but somehow failed. School-girls are kittle-cattle and not easily coerced. They generally chose for ‘toquades’ those the authorities did not wish them to have, namely the prettier among the younger professed novices, those who had made temporary vows and were dressed exactly like the great professed, minus the ring. But though the children could not be

prevented from choosing their own 'toquade,' they were allowed to choose their directress with restrictions only; that in the choice lay but among five or six of the older nuns who were more or less attached to the school, such as the mistress of the school, the mistresses of the 'Grande' and 'Moyenne Classe,' and the mistresses of the first, second, and third divisions, all elderly, or elderly at least in the eyes of fifteen, without special good looks or other physical charms.

Yet each child solaced herself with watching her own 'toquade' in chapel, and being extra naughty when the Beloved One was on guard so as to attract her attention. By means of this 'toquade' the child was attached to her convent in spite of its stringent rules, and wept bitter tears on leaving it. Aye, I have known many a fair young girl enter the novitiate because she simply could not tear herself away from the nun she loved, and find out—oft too late—her terrible mistake.

CHAPTER III .

THE usual excitement noticeable in all schools prior to breaking-up day also pervaded the convent, and once when I complained of the strict regulations, Madame Cécile des Sept Douleurs gazed at me in pitying surprise with the remark :

‘My poor Miriam, what will you say next October ?’ ‘Why just now the rules are terribly relaxed. You children are running about chatting all over the place. I would not tolerate such a state of things, were it not the last week.’

I had just asked for permission to fetch a pocket-handkerchief. She looked round, then shook her head. ‘You see that I have no child of Mary disponible at the present moment,’ she replied. ‘You must wait.’

‘But surely, ma mère, a girl of my age is capable of fetching a pocket-handkerchief, without getting into mischief. Let me go alone.’

‘Certainly not ; the idea ! Ah, here comes Lili. Lili, will you be so kind as to accompany Miriam to her cubicle ?’

Lili, the youngest *Enfant de Marie* of that year and one of the best-behaved pupils in the school, as also the meanest, most underhand, treacherous

little sneak of any school—past, present or future—tossed her head, and with a ludicrous mien of grave importance, beckoned me to follow her.

‘Had she not better hold my hand?’ I queried. But the sarcasm fell flat, and I was led away—a young woman nearing twenty—guarded and supervised by a child of fifteen, who followed me to my cubicle and held the curtain up to watch me, while I searched my drawer for a handkerchief.

It was the time of processions, when the lovely grounds were at their best, and I own that I loved these processions—to walk dreaming through this paradise, with the melodious singing of the nuns far behind, pleased me more than the monotonous gabbling of prayers in gallery and schoolroom. I just arrived in time for the ‘Corpus Christi’—a brilliant affair to which ‘Tout Paris’ came. Repositories beautifully decked stood at various places. The procession emerged from the chapel and visited each repository. First came the pupils in white muslins and veils, then the lay-sisters in white veils and black habits, then the gorgeous choir nuns wearing the stately white mantle of great feast days. Behind them came the Cardinal or Papal Nunzio bearing the Monstranz under a splendid canopy, which was held over him by four surpliced priests. Round him swarmed acolytes, priests, monks, red-frocksed choir boys bearing incensors, and in front of him twelve tiny tots in lace frocks, with natural flowers in their pretty hair, scattered rose-leaves on his path. The Smart Set, robed in the latest creations, chattering like magpies, and gobbling sweets,

fanning themselves or examining the handsomest clerics through their lorgnettes, trotted piously in the rear.

Other processions, less important, followed each other in quick succession; but the 'Gens du Monde' and the great Church dignitaries were not invited to all. One little private procession we made often on summer evenings to the Grotto of 'Notre Dame de France' to pray for the beloved 'Patrie' in the thralls of the hated Republic. The children, nearly all descendants of the 'Vieille Noblesse,' loved their 'Patrie,' their banner of the golden fleur-de-lys, their exiled Royal House, with a passionate love, with a devotion stronger than death. Their enthusiastic burning patriotism was charming to behold and touched me oft-times to tears. Each summer evening they clamoured eagerly for a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de France, in front of whose statue, and with clear young voices vibrating with the intensity of their ardent burning devotion, they sang:

'O Marie, O Mère chérie,
Rends à notre France la foi des anciens jours.
Entends du haut de ciel le cri de la Patrie,
Catholiques, Royalistes, Français toujours.'

'You love your France dearly, Marie?' I asked a pretty girl, as we stood in rank waiting for the signal to return to the classroom, after one of these open-air performances. 'You love your France, Marie de Montmorency?'

'Do I love my France! Oh, Sainte Vierge, just listen to this eccentric Anglishé asking me if I

love thee? 'Oh, ma France, ma France adorée!' How sweet she looked as she murmured these last words, her pretty face uplifted to the starry skies. So must Joan have looked as she stood, banner in hand, at the side of the Rheims altar watching her King receive the crown he owed to her alone.

'But do you love your France as much as you love your "toquade"?' I persisted.

Her 'toquade,' let me mention here, as well as the 'toquade' of more than half the school, was one Madame Bien-Aimée des Neuf Chœurs, a professed novice of about two-and-twenty—a silly, conceited, dolly-face, lisping thing, whose only asset, as far as I could see, consisted in a clear soprano voice, which enabled her to sing many of the solos.

Marie answered without hesitation, 'Yes, I love my France best. My love for Madame Bien-Aimée is just to enliven the dull convent days. It may pass as I grow older.' But my love for the "Patrie" will last beyond the grave. I would die for France a thousand deaths; I do not think I should care to die for my "toquade."

Die for France! I am sure she would, without flinching, as her ancestors had died, fighting round the golden fleur-de-lys at Bouvines and Crécy, at Blenheim and Pavie.

'Marie,' I exclaimed, 'you are a dear girl, and worthy of the great name you bear. Die for Madame Bien-Aimée indeed, that smirking dolly-mop! Why, you are worth a thousand such as she.'

She laughingly rebuked me for speaking thus disrespectfully of her adored one. But she did not tell of me. I will here remark that tittle-tattling was

left solely to the 'Enfants de Marie.' The naughty ones—possibly on the principle of honour among thieves—never got each other into trouble. Now Mademoiselle Marie de Montmorency, daughter of the Marquis of that name, and cousin to the Duke d'Alençon, as also one of the loveliest girls in a school of eighty, where there were many lovely faces, was at fifteen as troublesome a young lady as you could wish to see. She chattered all day, in spite of the stringent rules of silence. She never even made the slightest pretence of learning the easy little lessons set her, which would have shamed an English child of ten. She could be extremely saucy to those of the nuns she disliked, albeit in a refined courteous way, for she was too blue-blooded a gentlewoman to be vulgarly impertinent or actually hurt another's feelings; and her principal pastime consisted in ragging the priggish, sneaking, sanctimonious 'Enfants de Marie.' That she herself never wore the aspirant's ribbon, never even succeeded in getting proclaimed—the first step towards reception into the Congregation—need hardly be added. A few years after leaving the Convent she married a man of her own rank and is now a leader of the Faubourg St. Germain Aristocracy. I sometimes see her name in the Society news of the *Figaro*, and then before my mind's eye rises the sweet face lifted to Heaven as she prays for 'Ma France adorée.' The nuns tried so hard, I remember, to retain her for their Order. It was always one of their chief aims to swell their number with members, distant relatives, and friends of the Belgian, French, Austrian, and Spanish Royal

Houses. It gave them a certain 'status' and attracted the 'Grand Monde' to their parlours and chapels. But in Marie's case they tried in vain, I am happy to say; and I feel assured that out in the world, as wife of an honourable man, mother of little children, the leader of one of Paris' most exclusive sets, she leads a nobler, worthier and more useful life than if she had been passed through that inexorable mill of the novitiate, where all come out exactly alike, their individuality replaced by the same petty, silly narrow-mindedness. I am thankful that they never spoiled her—so broad-minded, so honourable, so true; dear fervent little patriot! Fair maid of France!

Breaking up day came at last. The lay-sisters packed our trunks, as they also mended our clothes, brushed our hair, made our beds. We were never allowed to do any menial work; but had to go to the Sœur Lingere, or one of her numerous satellites, for the sewing on of a button. The morning was shortened by a long mass during which we sang canticles, and M. l'Abbé said a few words of farewell and warning. Then came the dread 'lecture des notes'—the big one. There was a weekly one each Sunday of lesser importance. For the big 'lectures des notes' we assembled in the grand parlour and took our seats on benches ranged down the middle. The entire Community and novitiate seated themselves on chairs placed round the wall. Then, everything being ready, the Superior-General, a venerable lady of seventy-five summers, entered, surrounded by five or six dignitaries, and took her place on the

raised throne, while the whole assembly rose and curtsied low.

We were taught to regard the aged foundress as a being belonging to another sphere than the one we inhabited, as a saint to be canonised at the hour of her death. For my part I only saw in her during the five years of our acquaintance a jovial old lady, very fond of good cheer and still fonder of stale chestnuts. Once she got hold of a good joke, or what she deemed a good joke, she repeated it again and again to the roars of laughter of an adoring Community, who had heard it a dozen times before. She died at the venerable age of eighty-four—dear old soul—and during the last years of her life her only solace consisted in gobbling chocolate; while she roamed about the place, breviary held upside down in her trembling hands, and her toothless gums mumbling the old jokes, which sent her into fits of silent laughter. I do not know whether Church Militant has canonised her or intends doing so; but I firmly believe that she has secured a comfortable little place in Church Triumphant, and deserves it too; for if she gave no proof of heroic virtue, she certainly was a dear old soul, with kind word for man and beast alike.

Here again I imagine that if this good woman had remained in the world, married an upright, honest man, reared her children in a solid Christian faith, she might at her death have been likened to Solomon's jewel of great price. The narrow religious life of the foundress, converted into a little tin-god by her worshippers, made her the silly conceited old thing I knew. All her actions were

lauded to the sky, all her words—even the most inane—were repeated with bated breath or written down to be transmitted to posterity. In the nun's refectory she sat at a small table by herself. This table groaned under every delicacy known to epicures. Two or three kinds of wine, peaches, grapes, nectarines, and pineapples in early spring; oysters and asparagus, plover eggs and turtle soup, quails and ortolans at a time when they appeared elsewhere only on royal tables and in the dining-halls of American multi-millionaires. Well, one day—I was a novice at the time—the lay-sister forgot to place the crusty roll beside the snowy napkin. Notre Mère Générale, however, made no complaint. She ate what the gods had provided for her and asked for nothing, as good little children in the nursery are taught to do. After dinner the roll turned up, to the consternation of the lay-sisters in charge of the refectory. Immediately the edifying story ran like wild-fire from Community to Novitiate, from school to lady-boarders' apartments,

'Listen and learn, O, my children! Our great, our holy, our beloved Notre Mère went without her bread uncomplainingly. Too mortified to ask, too humble to complain. Ah, take an example from her, and when you want to complain about your food—think of her eating her breadless repast without protest.'

'I should jolly well think so,' whispered a naughty little Irish postulant in my ear. 'Only give me truffled pheasant, sweetbread and Pêche Melba, washed down by ten-year-old port, and

I—like Notre Mère—will manage without the bread.

One day our venerable saint fell ill, of indigestion most likely; but tell it not in Gath. For reason of her great age the doctors showed no little anxiety. Immediately the whole house fell on its knees in ardent prayer, telegrams were despatched twice a day to the twenty-five branch houses situate in Italy, Spain, France, and England. Lessons—what there were of them—were suspended; while we recited whole prayer-books, gabbled beads innumerable, made processions and Ways of the Cross unending, and importuned every saint in the Calendar and every soul in Purgatory. In spite of our prayers a moment came when she was not expected to outlive the night. The Blessed Sacrament remained exposed during forty-eight hours and round it knelt sobbing nuns in prayer.

‘Alas, my children!’ whimpered Madame Cécile des Sept Douleurs at the evening recreation—a very spiritless affair indeed. ‘In a few hours our saint will have left us to join the other saints in Paradise, and one day, you, who owe all to her, will be so many jewels in her crown of glory.’

‘But,’ expostulated one little reprobate pertly, ‘I want to have a crown all to myself. I don’t want to go to Heaven just to make part of another person’s adornment.’

The naughty little puss got quickly snubbed into silence, while Madame Cécile sadly warned her that such a wicked girl was hardly likely to get to Heaven at all.

Our venerable lady did not die of that indigestion, but lived to have many more; for she was an

extremely tough old dame and in no haste to leave her well-spread table for more spiritual joys up above, when she might look forward to wearing a crown composed of all the poor little girls, whose school fees provided her with the good cheer her soul loved so well. So let us go back to the 'Lecture des Notes,' where she sat enthroned in state.

Each girl stood up to answer to her name and remained the cynosure of all eyes, to be pilloried by each nun in turn. Some were praised, some encouraged, some rebuked; but dear old Maman Générale had a kind and jolly word for all, interspersing the ceremony with those little jokes so dear to her heart and which she served up 'à la rechauffé' on each similar occasion. On hearing my name called, she looked at me with keen interest, which proved that although she now saw me for the first time, my personality had been thoroughly discussed in her presence. She listened intently to what my class-mistress had to say concerning me; it proved little enough. I had only been among them five short weeks, and during that time had shown myself studious, courteous, obedient, as indeed one had a right to expect from a young lady of my advanced years. There were, as yet, no complaints registered against me. With alacrity I prepared to subside into private life, when the querulous voice of the elderly class-study mistress brought me to my feet again.

'Yes,' said she; 'Miriam was a good, obedient pupil at all times except during the history classes. Then she became insupportable. She criticised the actions of the Holy Popes, flatly contradicted

the Fathers of the Church, found fault with Torquemada, Mazarin, Wolsey, à Becket and other famous Generals of Orders or sainted cardinals. 'Yesterday,' concluded Madame Jeanne de la Pucelle, 'I was reminding my children how grateful we ought to be to Louis XIV for ridding our France of heretics by the Revocation of the Nantes Edict, when Miriam interrupted me to remark that of all the silly actions the Bourbons had been guilty of, the Revocation of that Edict was the silliest, as it sent thousands of expert artizans out of France. Fancy that child in her teens correcting me, who taught history before she was born !'

'It certainly sounds very impertinent, to say the least of it,' rejoined Notre Mère, sweetly. 'But then I don't really think that Miriam meant to be impertinent. It is difficult for great thinkers and profound erudites such as this dear child always to remember the little courtesies of life.'

I joined in the good-natured laugh against myself, and as I resumed my seat I received from the ancient dame such a friendly wink and loving nod that she won my heart there and then. Till the end I remained fond of jolly, joky Mother General, and dropped a tear to her memory when her final indigestion carried her off. What if she did deal in stale jokes ? What if she did enjoy her dinner ? Let him, who can honestly deny being fond of oysters, ortolans, quails, and asparagus, throw the first stone at her. What if her subjects did make a little tin-god out of an extremely commonplace old woman ? The fault did not lie with her. What if she did appear before God's

Judgment Seat laden with many sins. They were all—of that I am sure—small, petty sins of narrow-mindedness, conceit, childish greed. Of big shameful sins she was incapable, as were all the nuns, and I will take advantage of this digression to add that if any of my readers take up this book hoping to find in it some scandalous episodes à la Zola or Paul de Kock they will be grievously disappointed. I know nothing of other nuns, or other convents; but the Incarnationists, among whom I dwelt for five years, lived clean lives and were absolutely pure in thought, word, and deed. They were narrow-minded, one-sided, silly, childish—but they were chaste. Their affection for each other, for their superiors and confessors, was but one degree removed from drivelling idiocy, but it was purely platonic; while on the other hand their mutual dislikes could be very venomous and spiteful indeed. What struck me most in them was their childlike belief in themselves, in their immeasurable superiority to everyday people in the outside world, their fathomless spiritual vanity (for it was too petty to deserve the name of pride). Yet, while they aimed at mysticism and supernatural life, they were so ludicrously commonplace. They remained worldlings in monastic garb, neither better nor worse, neither more vicious nor more virtuous than nine hundred and ninety-nine lay Christians out of every thousand. But, whereas most Christians are ripened and chastened by the various duties and responsibilities that await them through life's journey, and grow unselfish and forgetful of self in their care and

anxiety for others—the nun, who, mostly goes straight from schoolroom to novitiate, remains her lifelong a giggling schoolgirl, ever analysing her little soul, ever vivisectioning her puerile conscience and giving to her Superior an inane worship which she fondly imagines she is giving to her God.

The distribution of prizes took place at four, and the children were fetched away immediately after, so as not to give them time to criticise among themselves their teachers' decision. It was those little underhand ways I so disliked at the Incarnation. If the nuns awarded the prizes with stern justice, what reason had they to fear their pupils' remarks on the subject? Barely had the last prize been given out, and Notre Mère, followed by her court, passed through the curtseying throng, than lay-sisters sprang up on every side and hustled their young ladies off to be dressed and from thence to the parlour, where friends awaited them to carry them off for eight long weeks into that hustling, busy, work-a-day world, where they learnt so much more that was good for their souls and minds than in the unnatural forced restraint of conventual life.

Then silence—the deep, weird silence that follows on a mighty uproar—and I sat alone in the deserted schoolroom, as I had sat so oft before in many another schoolroom, my eyes wet with unshed tears, a lump in my throat, a nameless pain gnawing at my heart-strings. But I did not weep; I never even felt a pang of disappointment. There never had been treats, holidays, pleasures of any kind for me, so that I could scarcely miss what I had never known.

At that moment the little hunchback Cécile bustled in, showing unmistakable signs of being in a hurry. The nuns were holding grand festivities, of which she reluctantly missed the merest fraction. So I must quickly be disposed of.

'Now, my little Miriam,' she said briskly; 'You are going to the "Immaculée," where you will spend your vacation. We do not keep pupils in this house during the holidays. No, do not trouble about your books; Sœur Marie Valerie will bring them over with your clothes this evening. Well, good-bye and good-night, dear. Can you find your way alone, or must I send a lay-sister with you?'

I quickly implored her not to fetch a lay-sister away from her hard-earned holiday, and having wished her a pleasant time, I disappeared through the French windows into the silent, sunlit grounds. Like all solitary people I loved Nature, so for two delicious hours I had one of Paris' most beautiful private parks all to myself, and revelled in its smooth lawns, shady trees, and odorous flowers.

Jacqueline d'Herblay had bade me farewell an hour ago, and with sparkling eyes for all she was leaving her adored one for good. I looked my surprise; she whispered her great secret in my ear, first making me promise not to divulge it to other pupils, which seemed hardly likely, as they were all going at the same time as herself. She was leaving school for good—yes, indeed; but October would see her return to don the postulant's cap and enter the novitiate to be near her beloved Madame Bien-Aimée, the popular 'toquade' of that year. She found it impossible, she explained to me

in thrilling undertones, to go out into a bleak cold world where no Madame Bien-Aimée's dolly face would lighten her life's journey. So, sacrificing a father who adored his one girl, an ailing mother who so needed an elder daughter's loving care, three small brothers to whom she might have given the mother's care they could not get from the real one, she resolved to join the Virgins, who follow the Lamb wheresoever He goes, for love of that other Virgin whose simpering smile meant more to her than the devoted love of a whole family. She looked at me with radiant self-satisfaction, waiting to see approval and admiration expressed on my face. I fear I disappointed her. My face and mind remained a blank, and I faltered: 'But, but; you intend to consecrate yourself to Jesus—not for His sake—but for the sake of Madame Bien Aimée des Neuf Chœurs.'

'And is not Madame Bien-Aimée His bride? And are not bride and bridegroom one—you, poor, uncomprehending heretic?'

At this mystical adaptation of the essence of Holy Matrimony, my sense of humour got the upper-hand, and I went off into fits of silent laughter, just as a little lay novice approached us to remonstrate respectfully with Mademoiselle d'Herblay for keeping her carriage waiting.

Then she left me, and I remained alone behind in this green Eden made gay with thousands of sweet-smelling flowers and the Vesper song of countless birds. Only when the moon began to rise behind the spreading oaks, did I turn my steps in the direction of the 'Immaculée.'

The 'Immaculée,' or little convent, was a big square building placed at the further end of the large grounds. It comprised a community of fifteen nuns, a school of about thirty small girls, who joined the big school after their first communion and a whole wing set aside for lady-boarders, who had each a well-furnished bedroom, and drawing-rooms, library, and dining-room in common; for which privileges they paid some two or three guineas a week. These lady-boarders were mostly elderly women, but there was also a sprinkling of younger ladies; converts, who would not return to a heretical family, and were strengthened in their resolve by the urging of priests and nuns. Also—I grieve to say—divorced ladies and ladies separated from their worse halves for reasons more or less questionable. All sorts of saints and sinners were welcomed by these pious, unworldly hotel-keepers in monastic garb, provided they had money, for the Incarnation always made it clear to all it might concern that philanthropic societies must be sought for elsewhere.

On entering this abode of peace and plenty and many virtues, I was kindly received by the sister portress, who had been left behind—poor thing—while the remainder of the Immaculée Community joined the revellers at the big convent. I spent my eight weeks' holiday much in the same way as I had spent all my previous holidays, namely, studying and reading. Rummaging on some bookshelves I found Corneille's and Racine's works. With these I wiled away the summer hours roaming through woods and park. Of the nuns I saw little

or nothing.' I caught glimpses of them from afar as they flitted about in groups of thirty and forty, all chattering like magpies. From the small window of the bedroom allotted to me I sometimes gazed into the Rue de l'Incarnation and watched luggage-laden carriages bringing nuns from other houses and taking others away to country and seaside, which proved without a doubt that I myself was the sole hermit within the enclosure; and whatever other ascetics might do, my nuns had no intention of spending their solitary hours in contemplation and silent prayer.

One day I met the Superior of the 'Immaculée' in the hall. A charming Polish lady was she of high degree, who had once been a pupil at this very convent. Having attained her seventeenth birthday—thus runs the legend—she returned to Cracovie, where her father, a testy old count, awaited her in order to give her in marriage to a Russian nobleman attached to the Imperial court. One evening he bid the pretty daughter array herself with extra care, as she was to meet her future husband for the first time at the house of a Polish grandee. But the young lady, who like my Jacqueline had left some prior attachment at her Paris convent, nurtured other plans. When all the guests were assembled—officers in gala, ladies in many-hued silks and satins with priceless gems on their snow-white arms and necks, the bride entered arrayed in her ugly convent uniform, the child of Mary ribbon its sole adornment, her pretty wavy hair strained off her forehead in a tight plait. The Russian nobleman, having no

taste for bread-and-butter misses, turned away in disgust, huffily refusing to come to any understanding with the disappointed count, who had hoped such great things from a son-in-law, who held the Little Father's ear. Balked in his dearest desire, the infuriated old count told his daughter to go to the devil. She obeyed and went, not to the devil, but back to the arms of her 'toquade,' carrying her mother's jewels and fortune away with her.

All this happened many years ago. When I met Mère Eugénie de la Tour d'Ivoire, I saw, instead of a young slim girl, a gigantic monumental apparition that might have served as an advertisement of Antipon before use, had Antipon been known in those days. I stepped aside while the giantess passed me with a kindly nod, and wobbled slowly into the garden, where she was reverently lifted into her bath-chair by a dozen willing hands.

A few days later as the little sister of the refectory helped me to some stewed mutton, she informed me that her eyes were red from weeping because their Mother had left them that morning to take the Marienbad cure, and would not return to them for six dreary, sunless weeks.

For a holy nun, who has renounced the World, the Flesh and the Devil, to go to the most fashionable watering-place in Europe at the most fashionable time of the year sounds rather like an anomaly. But when I recall to my mind's eye the Colossus who barred my way in the hall, I take a more lenient view of the case. Surely if anybody needed the Marienbad waters that year, she did—poor soul.

CHAPTER IV

THUS the radiant summer flew by, to be replaced by richly-hued autumn, and as I gazed on the beauteous scene I vaguely wondered why so many nuns stood in need of country or seaside air, when they could afford such a paradise in the heart of a big city. Were nuns so much to be pitied, I asked myself? Are the children of light so much more unsophisticated, unworldly, incompetent in money matters than the children of darkness? The Gospel says so; but when I contemplate those years of plenty in that palatial dwelling, I find myself doubting; and as I sat under a spreading copper-beech close to the chapel entrance one glorious evening in late September, while the nuns gabbled through Matins, I heartily agreed with them, as the words of the Psalmist, 'My heritage has fallen into pleasant lines,' fell on my ears.

But the 4th of October—the Feast of the Holy Angels—and with it the reopening of school, came apace. My liberty ceased for one whole year, during that time I should never find myself alone night and day for the fraction of a minute. On the evening of the third a lay-sister from the big convent came to fetch me, giving me by her

austere demeanour clearly to understand that martial law had set in. Stalking at my side in grim silence, she reproved me sternly, yet respectfully, when I begged to return to the other house by l'Allée des Platanes—the most picturesque and longest route. She concluded her admonition with the remark that Mademoiselle, at her age, ought to be thinking of her aspirant's ribbon instead of seeking to commit sacrilege by trespassing on hallowed grounds reserved to the brides of Jesus.

In the 'salle de recreation,' I found nearly the whole school assembled. Most of the girls, being from Paris, had driven over in their own carriages during the earlier part of the afternoon, and had already donned the uniform. My lay-sister, after assuring herself that I was safely under the eye of two novices standing guard at different doors, left me while I quietly sidled to an empty seat. I looked round at the listless faces of my fellow-prisoners, who made not the slightest pretence of listening to the life story of some dead and gone saint, read aloud in Madame Cécile's monotonous drawl. How different this was from the first day at school, as English boys and girls know it. No rushing about from room to room, choosing the best places in dormitories and dining-rooms. No sharing of sweetmeats and other goodies brought from home to sweeten school discipline and serve as antidote to home-sickness. Our convent children never saw their trunks, which were brought to the area by the gardeners and unpacked by the head 'lingère.' She handed all eatables to the refectorian, who doled them out to the children to whom

they belonged on Wednesdays and Sundays. Books and jewellery, games and other knick-knacks were received by Madame Cécile, and locked away to be returned to the 'lingère' on the following breaking-up day, and by her to be packed in the child's trunk as things too pernicious to see the light of day inside the hallowed convent walls. The 'lingère' herself saw to the clothes, which she distributed on given days.

Nor did the children ever chat merrily of holiday sports and travels. Another strict rule was—never to speak of the outside world for fear of bringing its depravity inside the cloister's sacred walls. During the five years I lived among them, I never heard pupil, novice, or young 'professe' mention her relatives, show photos of her family, or make the slightest allusion to her life outside the convent walls. When coaxing a child into good behaviour the nuns never admonished her to do right for the love of the mother who bore her, but for the sake of this, that, or the other saint, who lived and died some centuries ago, and of whose ultimate fate no one in the flesh—not even the Pope—can be quite sure. Or else, and still oftener, the child was brought back to the narrow paths of virtue to please Madame 'Une Telle'; their 'toquade,' whom, by the way, they changed frequently without a qualm. This ephemeral and periodical 'toquade' was by far the greatest incentive to sanctity for pupils and nuns alike.

When I had seated myself, I noticed to my intense surprise that my appearance created what seemed to be a pleasurable excitement among the

pupils. Why should they greet a nonentity like myself with such evident joy? During the last weeks of the preceding term I passed silent and unnoticed in their midst, nearly all going away without troubling to give me even the most supercilious nod by way of farewell. But now they all made way for me, as if each one wanted me by her side. One moment's perplexity, then a flash of light, and I understood. It was known that I had spent my vacation at Neuilly, and if not the rose or even the smallest leaf on the rose bush, yet I had dwelt for eight weeks near many priceless roses, and surely ought to know something about them. As luck would have it I had met Madame Bien-Aimée des Neuf Chœurs in the woods that very morning, so I instantly cabled the news to her many admirers, who had so feared her removal to a branch house. An electric thrill went through the assembly, the novices on sentry duty made indignant protest, and Madame Cécile paused in her droning to discover the cause of the disturbance.

'What is it, my children?' she mildly inquired; 'Who came in just now? Ah! was it you, Miriam? Why do you not come and say good-day, dear?'

I obediently rose and went to her side to receive the kiss of peace on my cheeks and the sign of the cross on my forehead—the usual salutation 'twixt nun and pupil. She asked me if I were well and how I had enjoyed my holidays; then, having dismissed me to my seat, she again inquired after the cause of the hubbub. I hastened to explain.

'It was my fault, ma mère. I believed that many pupils might like to have news of Madame

Bien-Aimée, so I tried to intimate by signs that I had seen her in the woods this morning, when she told me of her nomination to the post of Refectory Mistress during the coming term.'

A mighty shout of joy rose from thirty throats, while other girls, who had failed to be smitten by Madam Bien-Aimée's somewhat negative charms, sought to be reassured concerning 'their particular 'toquade.' They assailed me on all sides. What did I know of Madame Marie Joaquina, Madame Agnès de la Compassion, Madame Agnès Marguerite? The list appeared endless—I shook my head, I believed that Mesdames Agnès and Joaquina were still at Neuilly, for I had seen them at last Sunday's High Mass. I knew nothing of the others. The adorers of the last two named joined those of Madame Bien-Aimée in their joyous outburst. Madame Cécile laughed, scolded, then laughed again and finally asserted herself by making her voice heard above the din.

'Silence, my children! Do not impel me to give a general bad mark. As for you, Miriam, I shall make you sit with your face to the wall—great girl though you are—if you continue to dissipate the class. Now listen, all of you, to the edifying story of Benedict Labre, and seek to imitate him in his love of humility and mortification.' She returned to her book, while the children obediently abstained from signalling to one another, and subsided into comparative quiet. But their radiant faces betrayed only too well that M. Labre's many virtues did not engross their minds just then; and the eager way in which they kept

consulting their watches, nearly all valuable ones, and the only piece of jewellery allowed them, showed how longingly they waited for the supper bell. I wanted my supper too, but from less sentimental reasons, and was the only one who occasionally lent half an ear to Madame Cécile's reading. I gathered in these periodical fits of partial attention that M. Labre, coming to the conclusion that man's love for his Creator can best be proved by dirt, so ardently, so devoutly did he love God that he never allowed soap and water to touch his body. At the age of thirty he was so incrustated with filth that his features had grown well-nigh unrecognisable, and the least dainty person could not approach within ten yards without being overcome by the fœtid odour that emanated from so loathsome an object. The few rags that barely sufficed to cover him with some degree of decency were infested with unmentionable vermin; and did one of these insects fall to the ground, he immediately stooped to pick it up, tenderly called it his little brother in imitation of Assisi's great Francis, and bade it continue its meal to the glory of God. Ugh! and then the gong summoned us to our meal; but my healthy appetite had gone. I do think Madame Cécile might have chosen some more savoury saint as antepandial food for our souls.

The other pupils, who had heard all about Benedict Labre's little peculiarities many times before, jumped up with shouts of joy, and it needed all Madame Cécile's sternness to get them into rank and file. Snappishly she assured them that they need not be in such a hurry to see Madame Bien-

Aimée, who was not giving them a thought. The poor thing's jealousy was but too apparent, and I pitied her from my heart, for she ever treated us with great kindness, and it must have been hard to see the children, entrusted to her care, yielding but forced respect and obedience; while their love was given to some inane young novice, who had but little or nothing to do with them. Cloister jealousies are a very important factor, perhaps the most important, of the internal economy. When myself a professed novice, with free access to the Community rooms, I have often witnessed uncontrollable bursts of grief on the part of nuns aged thirty, forty, and more, because some younger, prettier sister had robbed them of a pupil's wayward affection. "To say that Madame Bien-Aimée gave her admirers no thought is utterly false. The arrant little flirt thought of nothing else, boasted among her sisters of each new conquest, and did all in her power to kindle and spread the flame.

The next day, school reopened with the Mass of the Holy Ghost, followed by the usual routine, which continued for thirteen weeks with appalling monotony. I now grasped Madame Cécile's meaning, when she assured me in the previous summer that discipline was terribly relaxed. Indeed I now wondered how I could have thought convent life strict and narrow during the last weeks of July. Looking back it appeared to be quite a free and easy life compared to what we were undergoing during that abnormal winter term. I say abnormal advisedly, for the life could be called neither healthy nor natural. After two or three weeks

Madame Bien Aimée disappeared from the refectory, for her beloved presence, it would seem, excited the children to extra naughtiness. They replaced her by a nun of exceeding ugliness and lack of charm; she did not suffice, however, to police us during meals. Three novices 'de coton,' as we irreverently called those who had but just taken the habit, stood on guard at various parts of the big hall glaring at the table assigned to them, and looking most ludicrously self-conscious and self-satisfied in their brand-new clothes, literally bursting with pride and importance when called 'Ma Sœur' by an elder nun. As in refectory, so in chapel, dormitories, class-rooms, the guard was doubled—aye, trebled at times. The fifteen minutes' conversation twice a day had been withdrawn and we were obliged to 'faire la ronde,' i.e. turn round and round in a circle singing silly convent ditties the whole hour. At midday, when the weather allowed, we were marched to the 'Allée des Marronniers' well wrapped up in grey shawls, with blue silk foulards tied round our heads. Here we beguiled the time with an exciting game of 'drapeaux,' which roused us from the apathy into which many of us were quickly sinking, and which—I firmly believe—saved many of the weaker minded girls from lapsing into drivelling idiocy brought on by the strict régime to which they were subjected at an age when growing girls need a little relaxation and indulgence. This game of 'drapeaux,' in which the whole school was divided into two camps called the Crusaders and Turks respectively, each camp having a flag to defend against the enemy

lasted exactly one hour and sent us back to the schoolroom with the blood tingling in our veins, and in a much healthier frame of mind than we could boast of during the remaining twenty-three hours. It was to my mind the healthiest part of the convent education and of more advantage to mind, soul and body than all those endless prayers gabbled continually; while the child's thoughts roamed, Heaven knows where. I had not been many months at the Incarnation, but it was borne on me that this enforced silence and restraint did many of the children incalculable harm.

'How do you manage to keep so silent at your age, Denise?' I asked a fifteen-year-old girl, who wore the aspirant's ribbon, and never—I truly believe—opened her lips from week's end to week's end except to recite her lessons, mumble her prayers, and answer to a direct question.

She smiled ecstatically as she gazed dreamily into space and shook her head: 'I don't wish to talk,' she said blissfully. 'Leave me to my delicious thoughts.'

'But of what, or, rather of whom, are you thinking?'

'Of whom but my adored one.'

Her adored one at that epoch happened to be a marvellously pretty Irish postulant under twenty, by name Marie Dorothea.

She was on the point of turning away, when she caught my eye keenly fixed on her, transfixing her, as if I would read her inmost soul. She blushed scarlet and looked guiltily down, as if she could not bear my gaze. 'Denise,' I whispered, 'my little

Denise, put 'Dorothea out of your mind, Chat, talk nonsense, deserve bad marks, risk losing your ribbon if need be. It will bring you nearer God in the end.'

'You are wrong there,' she petulantly retorted. 'It can never bring me nearer God to break the rules. I am sure it cannot harm my soul either to love Madame Dorothea, who is the Redeemer's affianced bride.'

I turned away. It occurred in a lull during the 'Ronde.' Behind me stood two graceless monkeys—notoriously naughty girls, who twitted like dicky-birds from dawn till sunset, excepting when interrogated at lesson-time; then, their prolonged acts of silence would have edified an entire Trappist Community. 'You'll catch another "note de bavardage," you reprobates,' I warned them. They shrugged their shoulders with that inimitable grace the Parisian woman alone possesses, and informed me amid peals of smothered laughter that they already rejoiced in eleven bad marks that week, so considered it only right and proper to earn a full dozen to present to Notre Mère Générale at to-morrow's 'lecture des notes.' I seemed to read their clean, honest souls and minds in their open roguish faces. From them I turned and looked at Denise, who still stood beside me with a half-sulky, half-shamed expression on her flushed countenance and a look in her eyes that ought not to have been there. And now I will tell the last I know of this Denise. Her silence and good behaviour soon won her the child of Mary ribbon, and even as a member of this virtuous congregation she so distinguished herself

by her sanctity, her many acts of mortification, her numerous confessions and communions, that in less than six months she rose to the giddy heights of President of the Congrégation. This exalted office is coveted by all. The president is the head of the school, she takes first and foremost place at all ceremonies, treats, public offices. She is above the law and—like the Pope—can do no wrong.

Well, at the end of my school year Denise was nominated to this important post in the place of the former president, who had been sent home owing to ill-health. Denise, I must say, presented a pattern of all the virtues. She communicated nearly every day, and the number of communions is the Catholic nun's measure of a soul's degree of holiness. Denise had therefore evidently reached the highest degree of sanctity a lay person can hope to attain. All likened her to Aloysius Gonzaga, John Berchmans, and other youthful saints, while she smirkingly accepted the praise due to her many heroic virtues.

Well ! one day, it being the first Wednesday of the month and ' jour de sortie,' when all the children who lived in Paris were fetched away by their friends to spend twelve hours in their families, and brought back in time for evening prayer, that same evening the mistress of the school made her customary round of the dormitories at ten o'clock. As she passed Denise's cubicle she inadvertently stumbled against a curtain-pole and brought down an outdoor dress that was hanging to it. The dress fell with a heavy thud ; surprised, the nun picked it up, and, examining it by the dim night-light,

discovered a book sewn in the hem. Perturbed and anxious, she hastily terminated her rounds, and taking the dress to her cell, unpicked the hem and found inside it a French novel of the very lowest type, with illustrations so filthy, so vile, so utterly disgusting that she felt her own soul besmirched, and refrained from receiving Holy Communion on the following morning, as she herself told some of us in after years. As I have already said, the Incarnation nuns were true gentlewomen, and as such, refined, chaste and pure. That one of their 'Enfants de Marie' could find pleasure in such prurient, low-class literature cut them to the heart. The next day Denise disappeared as by enchantment. At Mass she knelt among us. At first lesson her place knew her no more, nor did any of us ever set eyes on her again. At evening study the class mistress briefly informed us that Denise had returned to her parent's house—on account of failing health—and that the vice-president would discharge her various duties for the few remaining weeks of the scholastic year. Only long after did I learn the true story of poor Denise's fall from grace; then I recalled the look in the girl's eyes, when—blushing scarlet—she told me that night and day she thought of her beloved one. Poor little Denise! Had she been placed in a healthy English school, hockey, golf, and the ceaseless schoolgirl chatter would have left her small leisure for unhealthy brooding and filthy, low-class fiction.

Now I come to the mistress of the school, Mère Clara de l'Amour Mystique, the funniest little person I have ever met before or since. She must

have been about five-and-forty at the time I made her acquaintance, yet in many ways she behaved like a kiddy of twelve. And small wonder! She entered the Incarnation at that tender age, to stay behind its walls till death. She tried so hard, poor thing, during her year in office to win popularity, and failed ignominiously. For that reason, I believe, and partly out of spite, she tightened the reins of discipline to such an extent, that even the French girls used to such discipline openly rebelled, and in the following year the big Council replaced her by an Irish nun, a charming, level-headed, intelligent, broad-minded woman, endowed with a far greater dose of practical common-sense than her predecessor, presumably because she had only entered the convent at the mature age of thirty, after learning discretion and wisdom in this big, naughty world, whose inhabitants are mostly all doomed to eternal perdition, falling into Hell like leaves in autumn, as Teresa of Avila saw them in one of her ecstasies, while she herself sat enthroned next to the Holy Trinity in dazzling glory. For Spanish Teresa, like the Incarnation nuns, was nothing if not modest. Indeed the infantile conceit and simple, unfeigned vanity of God's most favoured elect always appeared to me their most charming characteristic. Thus Mère Clara de l'Amour Mystique simply revelled in the contemplation of her own beauteous soul and exalted mysticism. She never spoke of lay-people but with accents of deepest commiseration and contempt, and often told me that few would escape their doom, and those mostly the relatives, benefactors and friends

of the holy nuns, whose prayers and mortifications would carry them up to Heaven. Mère Clara had constituted herself my directress. When asked whom I desired to choose from among the five nuns selected by the authorities, I promptly replied that I considered myself quite capable of managing my own soul. But this would not do, so with many a honeyed word Mère Clara offered to direct my morals in the way they should go. I could not well refuse such an offer without appearing churlish, so I accepted politely, yet without enthusiasm, regretting oft-times later that I had not selected some more popular mentor who would have been less able to devote all her time to me. Mère Clara inundated me with directions, determined that I, at least, should choose her for my 'toquade.' She failed with me, poor thing, as she failed with all; but at least she had the consolation of knowing that I worshipped no one else, but remained unclaimed and fancy-free to the end. Other pupils reproved me with girlish severity: 'You are ungrateful, Miriam, you are ungenerous. You receive more directions than any of us. Mère Clara is devoted to you, and yet you are not "toquée."'

'But what would you have me do?' I queried in despair. 'I like Mère Clara; I esteem and respect her. What more can possibly be expected of me?'

'Love her as we love our toquades. Watch her in chapel, write her loving little notes, try and obtain a seat next to her when she visits us on Sunday evening. Hold her rosary beads, draw a

thread from her "cordelière" to keep as a relic in your prayer book.'

'Rats!' said I with more force than elegance; but luckily my cockney vulgarity fell unheeded on the ears of my patrician school-mates.

Indeed these numerous directions were most trying. I would be seated cosy and comfortable in the warm class-room, absorbed in my studies, which—luckily for me—I loved, as they were the only solace of my lonely and cheerless girlhood, when the door opened to reveal Mère Clara's peaky little face adorned with huge goggles. Walks in the park, that might perhaps have reconciled me to the inane discussions and arguments that ensued; but summer, alas, had departed! and French nuns fear cold, snow, rain, as much as they fear the devil, of whom they are everlastingly talking in a pious strain. So to the dreary Salle des Caoutchoux, reserved for the children's goloshes and shawls, we wended our steps and sat in the damp, smelly atmosphere for thirty minutes—the limit allowed for each direction—arguing, contradicting each other. Discussing Calvin, Luther, Torquemada, Ribera, Loyola, and other celebrities with appalling vehemence. What amused me most, however, and sent me into fits of silent laughter was the petty conceit and spiritual vanity of all cloistered virgins in general, and of Mère Clara in particular.

With the whites of her eyes turned up to the grubby ceiling, she told me of the delicious favours showered on her by her heavenly Spouse. With the words of the canticle she repeated some of the divine, soft nothings He whispered in her ear; as pointing

to the wound in His right side, He bade her enter it and remain in it alone with her Beloved one, 'sola cum Amor soli,' there to accomplish the mystical union of her soul with His divine heart. The sight of two sheep's-eyes peering through goggle spectacles does not lend itself to a very appropriate personification of a soul in ecstasy, and for all Mère Clara may have been allowed to pierce the divine mysteries with the eyes of her soul, methinks that Dame Nature treated her with scant kindness as far as the bodily visual organs were concerned. This, however, did not trouble her, even if she realised it. She was more than satisfied with herself. She plunged—so she told me—up to her neck, figuratively or rather mystically speaking, into an ocean of divine love; seated in the garden of her own beauteous soul at the feet of her Divine Spouse, they held sweet familiar discourse.

'But,' I asked one day, 'does not Christ love us all? Did He not shed His blood for the laity as well as for the religious? Have you proof absolute that He loves you more than He loves me?'

She slightly stamped her foot, for she was a very irritable little soul, in spite of her mystical union with Him who is ever meek and humble of heart.

'Does Jesus love you seculars as well as He loves His own Spouses? Silly Miriam! Whom does an earthly husband love best, pray—his own wife or the wife belonging to the other man?'

'M'm,' I pertly retorted. 'Strictly speaking, he ought to love his own wife best. But usually he prefers the wife belonging to the other man, to judge by our Divorce Court proceedings.'

She brushed my poor attempt at witticism aside with all the scorn it deserved, as she continued : 'Of course our Redeemer shed His blood for all mankind, of course He loves all those He died to save. But among those countless millions He selects a chosen few, just as you stoop in a vast meadow to pick a handful of blossoms, which to you appear fairer and more fragrant than the rest. These blossoms He transplants in His own particular garden. He waters them with the waters of His divine love ; He reveals to them the inmost secrets of His divine heart ; He weds them and cohabits with them in a mystical union, so sweet, so familiar, that the chosen soul rising on pinnacles of ecstatic rapture sees the Heavens open and hears the angelic choirs calling to her.'

'And can only the Roman Catholic cloistered soul aspire to this union ?'

'Only those who belong to Holy Mother Church, obey the Sovereign Pontiff, confess and communicate, fast and abstain, honour Mary and the saints, say their beads and wear the scapular, can hope to approach the Holy of Holies, *petite sotte* ! Do you expect my adorable Jesus to wed a Protestant, Mahomedan, or Jewish lady ? But it is not absolutely necessary for a mystic to live in a cloister. Many popes, cardinals and secular priests have attained to a high degree of sanctity, and a few—a very, very few lay people. But'—and here she smiled blissfully—'it is mostly inside the cloisters that He plucks His sweetest and most fragrant blossoms.' Then with her eyes ecstatically lifted to the dirty ceiling, she told me how once

she made part of a deputation to Rome, when they clustered—Mother General in their midst—at the Holy Father's feet. Leo XIII, tenderly bending over them, called them his sweet-smelling modest violets. The second adjective appeared singularly inappropriate in this case, and stifling a wild desire to laugh, I asked why violets—why not roses, iris, orchids, or some other imposing blossom? She patiently explained, I *was* so dense: the Pontiff alluded to the colour of their habit. She ever felt grateful that no other order had chosen that particular hue, that none wore so graceful—at the same time so mediæval and monastic—a costume. Thus she rhapsodised on for hours, wasting the time I might have employed more profitably studying my participles, which I spelt in every possible manner except the one advised by Messieurs Larive and Fleury. Wasting her own time too, for though she loved nothing better than to sit in the secluded garden of her soul, among the fragrant lilies and roses of her many virtues, and discourse with her Spouse, she appeared very fond of conversing with me in that grubby Salle des Caoutchoux. As the days went by she multiplied these directions, during which I argued and contradicted, contradicted and argued sufficiently to drive a saint crazy. Possibly my aggravating spirit of contradiction acted as a sort of stimulant on her—a kind of moral pick-me-up, and formed an agreeable if irritating change from the other children, who for all they could be very naughty to the nuns they did not love, and extremely cheeky even to those they favoured, yet accepted

as an article of faith that all priests, monks and nuns are saints lifted high above the laity. All have ecstasies and visions in which they see the Heavens open, and converse with the Holy Trinity, the nine angelic choirs, and the celestial and purgatorial saints, as easily as we poor worms of the earth converse with one another.

‘Do you know why Mère Waltruda Chrysostomus kept staring up at us? We were behaving with perfect decorum,’ I asked an *Enfant de Marie*, whom at her own request I accompanied to the gallery during Vespers one ‘*Tour de Sortie*.’ She answered my query in a most matter-of-fact tone, yet in perfect good faith.

‘Mère Waltruda did not see us; she stared into space. It is the feast of the Blessed Benedict Labre to whom she has a great devotion. No doubt he appeared to her as he oft-times does.’

‘I hope he washes himself before coming into the presence of a lady,’ I drily remarked, but was sternly rebuked.

‘*Sursum Corda!* Miriam, will you never learn to lift your soul above such earthly matters. Think what an honour for us, too, if the saintly Mère Waltruda really beheld the Blessed Labre standing close to us in the gallery.’

I shivered with disgust and vehemently protested against such unsavoury proximity.

Mère Waltruda, a one-time Superior, but now superannuated and put aside, was a most delightful old Irish lady, who enjoyed a high reputation for sanctity even in a society where saints and mystics are a drug in the market. How she deserved her

reputation I cannot say ; her chief characteristic, as far as I could see, being a very keen sense of humour, which enabled her to say the very wittiest things in the driest manner, sending her audience into peals of laughter, except the unlucky wight at whose expense she was being funny. For Mère Waltruda's wit, though delightful, was by no means harmless ; her biting sarcasm went very sharply home indeed, and I have seen many a nun, novice, lay-sister and pupil wince, even to bringing tears of shame and mortification, while the heartless audience rocked with laughter.

A few days after the feast of Blessed, if grimy, Labre, our mystic wag appeared at the midday recreation to fetch the English pupils for a chat in their mother tongue. There were some six or seven of us then, and we surrounded her with joyous welcome, for we all liked the dear, old Hibernian soul in spite of her sharp tongue. We crowded round her, all talking at once. As she took us into the park, for it was a sunny winter day, I, with scant breeding and less discretion, silenced the others to inquire whether Benedict Labre had really appeared to her on the preceding Wednesday, and begging her to tell us all about the vision.

She smiled mysteriously and sweetly rejoined : ' What visions I may or may not have had in the past, my dear child, do not concern you. But the one I enjoy at the present moment concerns you all the more, for it is that of a young lady, in her nineteenth year, whose head would disgrace a Strewelpeter.'

Amid my schoolmates' delighted peals of merriment I dismally raised my hand to a tangled maze of black curls, and tacitly acknowledged that my indiscreet behaviour had merited me the snub.

But to go back to Mère Clara, the sweet-smelling violet whom I have left sitting entranced amid eighty pairs of muddy goloshes. Here is a little tale to show what erroneous ideas she nourished concerning the Fourth Commandment. It concerns a lay-sister. 'To say a word *'en passant'* of these Incarnation lay-sisters: they wore black habits, purple cordelieres, starched veils; they worked in silence from dawn till dark; they spoke little, had but rare recreations and found scant leisure for orisons, ecstasies, and visions, all which they left to the soaring choir nuns. They called the pupils by their family names, always courteously prefixing the *'Mademoiselle,'* and treated them with cold, distant respect, while they waited on them and attended to all their wants. The pupils, on the other hand, and very rightly too, were expected to address the lay-sisters politely, to say *'Merci, ma Sœur,'* and *'S'il vous plaît, ma Sœur,'* each time the occasion presented itself. Many of these serving sisters were truly humble, self-effaced, genuinely holy souls, for all they were but servant girls. They brought no dowry, but had to bring other assets instead: a strong health, an intelligent and willing capacity for work, a firm resolve to make themselves useful. Puny, ailing girls, in constant need of nursing and medical attendance; stupid girls, who could not be made to understand their work; lazy ones, who preferred

warm cosy chapel to the cold, sloppy scullery and area, quickly found themselves on the wrong side of the sacred walls, and without a month's notice or board wages either, which the luckier handmaiden of Babylon can obtain by applying to a grandfatherly magistrate, who generally sides with her.

Well, to return to my little story: One day I noticed a lay-sister helping in the children's refectory, who was attracting general attention among the pupils by reason of her wondrous beauty. A few weeks later she disappeared—never to return. I questioned Mère Clare, 'Was Sœur Heathoberth ill?'—the name having been given her presumably in honour of the gentleman who, during the latter part of the tenth century, sat on the chair now occupied by Winnington Ingram.

Mère Clara thrilled with contempt and disgust, as she informed me that the wretched creature had returned to the husks—meaning the Irish bog from whence she sprang—in spite of all their endeavours to retain her, she being a very hard-working, healthy and capable girl, qualities most appreciated in lay-sisters. The aristocratic Incarnationists know as well as the pleasure-loving society dames that a healthy, capable, willing servant is a jewel of great price and not lightly to be parted with.

By questioning my saintly mystic, I obtained the following information piecewise. Sister Heathoberth, an Irish girl from the wilds of Kilkenny, inhabited a wretched hovel in company of a bed-ridden mother, an elder sister, and a friendly pig.

At the age of eighteen, Heathoberth—who by the way bore another name in those days—came to the conclusion that the elder sister sufficed to tend the old mother and the pig, and resolved to give her pure soul and beautiful body to God. She offered herself to the purple-clad nuns through the medium of the parish priest, who undertook all preliminaries, as she herself knew as much about these patrician visionaries as she knew about Mayfair's 'Upper Ten.' The nuns accepted her with alacrity, paid her fare, and during the year of her postulat and first ten months of her novitiate, treated her with great kindness, as they treated all their lay-sisters. Heathoberth proved herself a devout, merry little creature, who fulfilled her manual duties with great zeal and smiling face. But about ten months after her clothing, news—bad news—came from green Erin to change her joy into sorrow, her laughter into tears: the elder sister had died suddenly after three days' illness, and the poor old mother lay sobbing and alone in the Kilkenny hovel. She wanted her Kathie back, she wrote in her trembling, illiterate scrawl. The grand lady nuns would find plenty of willing girls to wait on them, she had but her Kathie. On reading this tear-stained, pathetic appeal, Heathoberth broke down completely. Oblivious of her high destiny as mystical bride to the King of kings, heedless of the fact that it behove her to live up to her high-sounding episcopal title, she threw broom and pail aside, neglected beads and orisons to give full vent to her woe. This sudden change attracted the attention of the choir nun

who filled the important office of Mistress of the lay-sisters. She, of course, had opened the Kilkenny letter, but unable to read the appalling scribble, had handed it over unread to the little novice. She now sent for the former, lovingly to question her. In broken French, the poor child poured forth her recital of woe and sorrow, ending with the prayer that she might be immediately returned to Irish shores. Now, as I have already said, the Incarnation was ever as anxious to retain a capable lay-sister, as to rid itself of a useless one; so the Mistress set herself heart and soul to win back this wandering sheep to the fold. She did not seek to obtain her desire by the drastic means of mouldy bread and foetid water, sparingly dealt out, lashes with iron-spiked whips, and other uncanny methods, of which so many writers of conventual life tell us. Her only methods were tender, coaxing words. She reminded Heathoberth that she was betrothed to a Heavenly Bridegroom. Who would console Him, if she jilted Him two months before she was to have pronounced her nuptial vows? With ready Hibernian wit the little jilt retorted that He, who counted his brides by thousands, would no doubt be able to find plenty of comforters. The nun then conjured her in the words of the Gospel to leave the dead to bury their dead, while she followed Christ. Yet the last word still remained with Kilkenny Kate, who casually remarked that old mother couldn't well conduct her own funeral, being crippled in both legs.

For the next few days poor humble Heathoberth found herself a person of some importance.

The place of honour beside her Mistress being left to her at the lay-sisters' rare recreations. High dignitaries, meeting her in hall or staircase, gave her friendly little nods, while little dainties found their unwonted way to her place in the refectory. But all to no avail—Miss Heathoberth remained adamant. Back to the old cottage she must go, and that without delay. At last, to their intense regret, the nuns gave in and resolved to send the girl back by the first opportunity, for travel alone she could not. It would have been quite unlike the Incarnationists to turn a girl in her teens, of such marvellous beauty, alone and unprotected into the wilderness of Paris streets. At the hour of parting the consecrated habit was taken off Heaven-favoured Heathoberth, and a plain little black dress placed on the shoulders of poor earth-bound Kath. A goodly little sum of money was also handed to her, and thus did she leave the succulent flesh-pots of Egypt for the husks of her Irish bog. The Mistress put her into the waiting cab at the side of two elderly sisters, who were bound for the Incarnation of Manchester, kissed her lovingly, reminded her never to forget her Sunday mass, her Easter duties, her Friday abstinence (oh irony ! henceforth poor Kath would taste meat on Sundays only, and not always then), entreated her ever to remain a true child of Mary, since she could no longer aspire to the greater honour of being a chosen Spouse of Mary's Son, and gave her a blest medal as last gift.

From first to last the girl never received one harsh, unkind word. They did not ill-treat her ;

they despised her. Mère Clara, as she told me the story of the wretched creature's fall from grace, spoke of her much as we should speak of a Mrs. Dyer of infamous memory. Then she turned to the more pleasing contemplation of her own little soul, murmuring ecstatically that Jesus found so few worthy for Him to wed (seems to me He had a goodly number), that only one soul out of every million could aspire to mount on pinions of love to those glorious heights of a mystical union with God. Thus she drivelled on till an Austrian choir nun, one Elizabeth Benedicta—a pet aversion of my saintly Clara's—passing through the Salle des Caoutchoux exchanged some acrimonious words with her concerning a child they both favoured, and while these two soaring virgins courteously squabbled, I escaped to the class-room.

CHAPTER V

A FEW days after I had left Mère Clara de l'Amour Mystique and Madame Elizabeth Benedicta saying nasty things in polite tones (for the Incarnation nuns were never loud-voiced or vulgar) to each other, I noticed a thrill of excitement in the school, to be informed, on enquiry, that next week we should celebrate the Feast of St. Catherine of Alexandria, the patroness of schoolgirls, and that for one whole day books and discipline would be laid aside to give place to games and fun and ceaseless chatter.

One evening, Madame Cécile reminded the big class that it was customary for each girl to pay ten francs towards the sumptuous St. Catherine's dinner, and that Camille de Kerouac, the president, would make the collection during to-morrow's recreation. The pupils received the news without surprise, as without enthusiasm, and when Camille passed with the bag, each one dropped her gold piece into it without comment. Two days later I understood their reticence. After prayers, instead of giving the signal to form ranks for the dormitory, Madame Cécile reseated herself and requested us to do likewise.

'My children,' she began, 'as you all know,

it is a time-honoured custom of the "Incarnation" pupils to give their St. Catherine's dinner to the poor, while they content themselves with the ordinary bill-of-fare. Yet though customary, it is not obligatory. So should any of you prefer to eat her own ten francs' worth of dainties, please say so.'

A moment's deep silence followed, then Madame Cécile continued: 'Am I to understand that you all desire to give your feast day dinner to God's holy poor?'

From all sides of the vast hall came a hesitating 'Oui, ma mère! Oui, ma mère.'

'C'est bien, mes enfants! en rang pour le dortoir,' and with a clap of her hands Madame Cécile dismissed the subject from her mind, and us to our dormitories.

I laughed inwardly. In years to come, when I learnt that the holy poor to benefit by the children's generosity turned out to be the good nuns themselves, I laughed still more. In schools of every nation and creed it is customary for the authorities to provide the school treat dinner. Here, however, not only were the poor children made to pay for their dinner, but it was filched from under their very noses at the last moment, while the nuns coolly pocketed £40 collected by the head-girl for the meal.

Some readers will call out: 'Theft! injustice! dishonesty!' I do not think so. The nuns pronounced the canonical vow of poverty, possessed therefore a theoretical if not practical right to style themselves 'God's holy poor.' Nor did they constrain the children to sacrifice their festive repast. Once, before my time, a courageous little

puss rose bravely to her feet with the remark that she intended eating her own ten francs' worth of good things. Madame Cécile answered with that imperturbable calm that ever characterised her: 'C'est bien, mon enfant, I will notify your wish to Madame l'Économe.' On Saint Catherine's day a small table stood in the middle of the refectory laden with good things. At it this bold young person seated herself, and without a blush gobbled her succulent meal amid the derisive shouts of laughter of her seventy-nine schoolmates, who pretended to enjoy their stewed mutton and boiled potatoes, while deep down in their hearts they envied her her courage; for though she alone dared face public ridicule, the rest of them performed their sacrifice unwillingly, and on the feast day, discipline being somewhat relaxed, albeit novices and 'Enfants de Marie' policed us on every side, I heard many pupils grumbling under cover of the general hubbub about their lost dinners. The nuns, however, had no misgivings, and before the end of the day managed to add another £4 to their other perquisites.

In the 'Grande Salle' a programme announcing the various items of the festivities occupied a conspicuous place. Two of these items puzzled me. One informed us that at four we should partake of a 'Goûter anachorétique et prophétique.' The other, that on payment of one franc we could see Saint Peter in the 'Classe du Milieu' at half-past four. I passed over Saint Peter with silent contempt; I would not have wasted a precious franc for a glimpse of him, had I possessed that sum. But my mother allowed her children little

or no pocket money, and in that I must admit that she acted judiciously. It was a maxim of hers that cheap sweets and heavy pastry between meals were not favourable to good health, good teeth, or good morals, and I was the only one in the school who failed to drop a gold piece into Camille de Kérrouac's well-worn velvet bag to pay for my share of a non-existent dinner.

The announcement of the four o'clock refectio*n* filled me with delight. It seemed that, at last, the nuns meant to give us a nice feed at their own expense. The other children evidently thought so too, for all hastened to the refectory with bright expectant faces, which grew most comically blank at the sight of the usual roll and coffee-tinged water that awaited us. Madame Stéphanie, the refectory surveillante, answered our looks of dismay with the remark that this was the 'goûter anachorétique' et 'prophétique' promised us. Many a holy anchorite ate nothing but bread and water during a life-time of penance; and as for the prophecy—well, we should find that when we began our meal. We did, and discovered that each roll contained a slip of paper, on which some silly prophecy was written. We ate our dry bread, and read aloud the ridiculous fate foretold to each of us with shouts of good-humoured laughter, for all the pupils were too well bred to complain openly; moreover, most of them had been at the convent several years, and were used to their saintly teachers' little ways.

In twenty minutes we were ready for the next entertainment, in which Saint Peter promised to

appear to us on payment of one franc per head. We assembled in the big class, and each girl dropped her contribution into the president's bag. I, guessing the whole thing to be a catch, slipped into the Salle de Recreation, and, when I rejoined the others a little later, had only to listen to their hilarious chatter to learn what had taken place. The daylight having been carefully excluded from the big class-room, the folding doors of the Classe du Milieu opened slowly to the strains of the Latin hymn, 'Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram . . .,' sung by an invisible choir. The smaller inner room was draped in black, lighted only by three wax tapers and completely empty except for a black-draped table placed in the centre, and on which lay five small garden pebbles. While the children gazed in awed silence, a voice coming seemingly from overhead addressed them:

'What seek ye, Christian souls?'

'We seek Saint Pierre,' cried the children in chorus.

'What see ye lying on the table?' again came the unearthly voice.

'Cinq pierres,' returned the perplexed Christian souls, still in chorus.

'Well, children of Holy Church, ye asked to see Saint Pierre, ye have seen "cinq pierres." Depart in peace.'

The doors then closed to the final strains of the anthem, while the children, at last realising the trick that had been played on them, went off into peals and peals of endless merriment, and thus I found them on returning from my voluntary exile.

Who can deny that these mystical unworldly virgins could give points to many a Wall Street financier?

There existed many other clever business methods by which the nuns got hold of their aristocratic pupils' plentiful pocket money, methods in themselves perfectly fair, honest, and above board. Each Wednesday Madame l'Économe held a sort of bazaar at which all sorts of cheap rubbish such as books and objects of devotion, sweets, fruit, stationery, pious knick-knacks bought wholesale at the big Paris warehouses, were resold to us retail at the most fabulous prices, at an average profit of 99 per cent. But no one got forced to buy. I spent not one farthing at these bazaars during the whole of my school year, yet Madame l'Économe never treated me less kindly for that.

Again, each Sunday and Wednesday the pupils received parcels of expensive goodies from their friends, who visited them in the parlour from two to four. These dainties had to be handed to the refectorian sisters, who stood sentry at the parlour doors to prevent the eatables being carried into the schoolroom. At supper each girl found her parcel unpacked and neatly arranged on a plate in front of her, never so much as a sweet drop having ever been found missing. While the children shared each other's dainties in profound silence, the president passed round the refectory holding a big dish in both hands and monotonously singing: 'N'oublions pas les pauvres, mes amies, n'oublions pas les pauvres.' Then each child plated, or did not place, some small contribution on the dish. The following Thursday and Monday when we faced our dry

bread and water, Madame l'Économe appeared in our midst holding the dish of sacrifices, and resold its contents retail at exorbitant prices. I have often known her make a couple of pounds at one of these rounds.

Again, we had theatricals, and 'Tableaux vivants' several times a year, to which we invited the Community and even Madame Générale. Sometimes a priest or two honoured us with his presence. I have even had the pleasure of acting once before a Papal Nuncio, and twice before a Cardinal. For these performances the artistically-gifted nuns wrote some hundred programmes, which the pupils bought, paying a goodly price for the illuminated ones, to offer to their toquade. So that while some pretty popular nun would be inundated with a dozen programmes and more, the nun at her side remained empty handed, yet with swelling heart, for I truly believe that the greatest suffering known to a nun is to go 'un-toquaded'—to coin a new word—through life.

The day following Saint Catherine, we went back to rigorous silence, stern discipline, numerous devotions—and a small amount, a very small amount, of study. No break occurred to relieve the dreary monotony of convent life, except that I noticed an access of good behaviour among aspirants, proclaimed, and some who aimed at proclamation, as first step towards the much-coveted blue ribbon. On inquiry I learnt that the 8th of December, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, took rank as first among Our Lady's numerous feasts, and was also chief festivity of the Congregation, at which new members were usually elected.

On that day we wore our white muslins and spent many hours in the incense-laden chapel, in front of an altar resplendent with lights and flowers, listening to hymns, French and Latin, sweetly rendered by an excellent choir. The lucky candidates knelt in front of the altar to receive, some the blue, some the purple, ribbon; while the names of the newly proclaimed had the honour of being called in a loud voice by M. l'Abbé, standing on the altar steps. This ceremony concluded, all the children of Mary received permission to don the religious habit and disport themselves in this holy garb till bedtime. They even went for a ten minutes' visit to the Salle de Communauté, to sit beside their 'toquade' in a blissful trance and be asked if they felt the vocation stirring in them. On such occasions nearly every child caught this wonderful vocation badly, but the feeling evaporated with the most intelligent at the next jour de sortie, I am pleased to say. I will here add that just twelve girls belonging to my particular school-year are this day wearing the most charming costume extant in Mother Church; nor can I say that these twelve were the nicest, the most intelligent, the most gifted and talented among the eighty—far from it. Indeed, I may safely say that it was the other way about.

Among the aspirants of that epoch I still noticed the Berliner Thusnelda, whose 'Vaterland' I so bravely defended on the day of my arrival. One evening, under cover of the silly ditties we sang, while we hopped round in a circle, I questioned her and found to my surprise that she had worn the purple ribbon for over two years.

‘You ought to have been received into the Congregation long ago,’ I remarked, amazed, ‘a good pupil like you.’

‘I may be a good pupil, but I am also “une prussienne, une sale prussienne,”’ she replied with withering contempt; ‘and the French girls won’t vote for a “prussienne” if they can help it, no matter how hard I try to do right and observe the rules.’

‘But it is most infamous injustice,’ I indignantly retorted; ‘and do you mean to tell me that you will be again refused on the eighth?’

‘No,’ she returned blissfully; ‘I am sure of my ribbon this time for Madame Tecla complained to Madame la Supérieure Générale and M. l’Abbé, who have both severely remonstrated with the president.’

Madame Tecla des Saintes Phalanges, a sweet-faced Austrian, who had been a Tyrolean Countess of high degree in her own country, befriended the forlorn little Berliner, who, if not exactly her countrywoman, still spoke the same beloved mother tongue, albeit with a very different accent. That Thusnelda worshipped the ground she trod need hardly be added.

Poor Thusnelda von Wachholtz’s convent life was not a bed of roses. She found herself the only Prussian in the establishment, all the other German-speaking nuns, pupils, and lay-sisters being Austrian, Belgian, and Swiss subjects. The vials of national wrath were therefore concentrated and poured out on her unoffending head. If the names of Hohenzollern, Bismarck, Moltke cropped up at a lesson, the whole class uttered a prolonged groan followed by a hissing of the most venomous nature. At

the rondes each evening one song was bellowed into the tormented child's ears, every girl turning round to glare at her, while they screamed in chorus:

Vous n'aurez pas l'Alsace et la Lorraine,
Et malgré vous nous resterons Français.
Vous avez pu germaniser la plaine,
Mais notre cœur—vous ne l'aurez jamais.

'Oh, buck up,' said an English girl to her one day by way of consolation. 'What have you got to whimper about? Let the Frenchies shout their "Vous n'aurez pas" till they're hoarse. As long as you've got the blessed old place, you can afford to be generous. As for their silly "cœurs"—which you cannot possibly want—tell the froggies to keep 'em.'

'All the more,' I chimed in, 'that you not only hold l'Alsace Lorraine, but are likely to hold it for many generations to come. The Frenchies would be cleverer than I take them for, should they ever succeed in getting back what your Bismarck has once gripped between his teeth.'

At the mention of Bismarck, Thusnelda smiled, for like all intelligent Prussians she knew that it is to him more than to the Hohenzollern that Prussia owes its present greatness.

'I know you admire our Bismarck, Miriam,' she said gratefully. 'You, at least, realise what a man he is. Il est gentil, n'est-ce pas?'

The epithet 'gentil,' as applied to the gigantic Reichs Kanzler, sounded comical, to say the least of it, and I with difficulty suppressed a laugh as I recalled a glimpse I once caught of him thumping along 'Unter den Linden' on his way to the palace.

And a more ferocious, grumpy, bull-dogged old gentleman I never wish to see again.

Then Christmas came! But what a different Christmas from the one to which our English children are accustomed. Our religious preparations consisted in the veneration of the Infant Jesus of Prague, the facsimile of a miraculous wooden doll found in some excavations undertaken in an old part of that town. It was of the size of a two-year-old child, and it existed largely, as far as I could see, in order that its frock might be changed several times a day. The trousseau of that wooden doll might well make a Society dame green with envy. I counted fifteen dresses during that one Advent: rich brocades and silks at twelve francs a yard, embroidered by the nun's artistic fingers with thick gold braid. At a rough guess, I should say that our little Bohemian Jesus—there were so many of them—spent some twenty pounds on his frocks during that one year. And yet had *He* been asked—He, who lay cold, hungry, and naked in the Bethlehem manger—would He not have entreated us to spend that money on the thousands of little children starving in the Paris slums during that never-to-be-forgotten winter of 188—? Those little children He loved so well and died to save. I venture to think so. My opinion, however, was not asked, and when I gave it unsolicited, as I often did, I received a courteous reminder to concern myself with my own affairs. So we blithely continued to carry our smartly-dressed Jesus of Prague from room to room, to say novenas and triduums in His honour, to mortify our appetites for His sake, i.e. to give our

dessert, the goodies we received in parlour, and our weekly pocket money, to him. But as he could not—being made of wood—very well eat the sweeties or spend the money Himself,* I presume that His spouses had the benefit of our self-denial.

Talking of Advent mortifications, I recall one charming anecdote. To the Incarnation of Cannes that year came the two little Caserta Bourbons, aged seven and five respectively. One day during religious instruction a young nun told her tiny listeners the old, old story of Bethlehem, ending with the words: 'And you, dear children, will you do nothing for Him who loves you so? Have you no gift for the little Jesus, who suffered cold, hunger and fatigue for your sake? Can you not think of some small gift to offer Him? He is content with so little, you see. An unkind remark held back, a friendly smile in answer to a harsh word, a reproof humbly accepted, the offering of a dessert—anything, no matter how small, will please Him.'

Then she stopped and the class waited in silence for the dinner-gong. Close to the teacher's cathedra, at a small desk by themselves, sat the two tiny Royalties, swinging four bits of leg into space. Suddenly a soft whispering reached the nun's ear:

'Pia!'

'Yes, Immaculée.'

'Pia, what can we do for dear little Jesus who died to save us?'

'I don't know, Immaculée.'

'Pia, I think we might offer Him to-day's dessert.'

‘Yes, Immaculée. ‘Dear little Jesus shall have our dessert.’

Then silence again. The gong sounded, and the class marched in rank to the refectory, their two small Highnesses bringing up the rear. From the open refectory door came forth a most delicious odour, and the listening nun again heard the following colloquy :

‘Pia!’

‘Yes, Immaculée.’

‘Pia,’—with a groan—‘it’s roast chestnuts!’

‘Yes, Immaculée,’—with an answering groan—‘it is roast chestnuts!’

Then another silence pregnant with meaning, and again : ‘Pia,’ more hopefully ; ‘Pia, do you think little Jesus will mind very much waiting till to-morrow for His dessert?’ ‘No, Immaculée,’ with joyous emphasis. ‘No, I am quite sure dear little Jesus won’t mind waiting just one day. We are so fond of roast chestnuts, you know.’

To return to Neuilly : Christmas Eve came at last, and all day, nuns and children thronged the confessionals in preparation for the grand Midnight Mass. At eight we went to bed as usual to rise at eleven-thirty, and go down to chapel, which was one blaze of light, while the altar disappeared under some fifteen pounds’ worth of hothouse blossoms. We children, robed in white muslin, must have presented a pretty sight from the choir, as we knelt in the gallery in long rows raised one above the other. At eleven-forty the organ, played by a master hand, swelled, thundered, and pealed forth a rush of harmonious sounds ; while the well-trained

choir, which contained several excellent voices, sang :

Noël, Noël ! cri d'espérance ;
 Il est à nous l'Emmanuel.
 Chante Israël ta délivrance ;
 Jésus est né, Noël, Noël !

To these harmonious strains the great red curtains facing the altar rose slowly, and two by two the nuns, robed in their long white mantles, bearing wax tapers, walked through the choir to the Virgin's chapel, transformed each year into a rustic-thatched stable from the 23rd of December till after the 6th of January, the Feast of the Epiphany. In the stable there knelt in adoration on either side of a yet empty crib a life-size Joseph and Mary, Baby angels, held by invisible cords, floated in mid-air. Hens pecked the fallen straw at divers places, and in the distance cows, horses, sheep peacefully grazing, gave the whole a very realistic appearance. The nuns knelt in a row on either side of the stable leaving a space for Mother Général, who, holding in her arms a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-and-white dimpled wax baby, passed on alone to the crib, kissed the chubby feet, then placed the babe in the crib, while from two hundred voices the sweet melodious strains rose high and true to the vaulted ceiling :

Jésus est né, Noël ! Noël !

Then followed Cherubini's most beautiful and solemn mass in A minor. The celebrant and his acolytes, robed in gorgeous vestments, came in procession from the sacristy, surrounded by a troop of red-robed choir boys, little lads ranging from six to twelve, and all chosen for their pretty faces. On

the stroke of midnight the celebrant elevated the Sacred Host, the nuns prostrated themselves, the choir, to the accompaniment of violin, 'cello and organ, sang in low minor key Adam's exquisite :

Minuit, Chrétiens ! C'est l'heure solennelle
Où l'Homme Dieu descendit jusqu'à nous.
Peuples, à genoux ! Voici notre délivrance
Jésus est né ! Il vient, l'Emmanuel'—

and the convent bells pealed and clashed.

At communion each nun kneeling alone at the communion table raised her hand, and, with her eyes uplifted to the consecrated wafer held before her by the celebrant, renewed her solemn vows. Then, having communicated, she drew her veil over her face and returned to her seat. It was nearly three before all the worshippers received the bread of life ; and we returned to bed, having partaken of chocolate and cake in the refectory.

Christmas day we spent entirely in chapel ; our dinner differed in no wise from the plain but excellent ordinary ; and on the 26th we went back to the usual routine of scanty lessons, scantier play hours, and innumerable devotions, nearly all performed in front of the charming stable, in the foreground of which a charming wax angel boy held out a money-box, into which small silver bits—coppers were tabooed—tinkled all day, as the smart Paris people streamed in endless succession past the manger.

On the evening of the 31st the children who lived within a few hours' journey from Neuilly went home for a week's holiday. At midnight the nuns, and those pupils who remained behind, rose to usher in the New Year with the Te

Deum; then back to bed comforted with cake and chocolate.

I spent my New Year's holiday in the company of some thirty other girls. We could read, we could write, we could chat. The little ones were allowed to romp. But always two novices stood on guard to prevent forbidden or private conversation, and were zealously seconded by a couple of children of Mary. On New Year's day we received stringent orders not to leave our quarters or loiter about the house—a thing, by the way, we were never allowed to do. On that day the Sacred Community piously ushered in the coming year by one of their multitudinous feasts, and the junketing nuns had no desire to be reminded of shop by the sight of our charity-school uniforms. On that day the 'Enfants de Marie' alone policed us, to their unbounded joy and to ours also; for, although they issued orders from dawn till sunset with unabated zeal, we none of us made the slightest pretence of obeying these orders, but followed unchecked our own sweet will. Those among us who had not been at the 'Incarnation' on any previous 1st of January—two pretty little English sisters and myself—supposed not unnaturally that our delayed Christmas dinner would be set before us that day, our hopes being confirmed by some delicious odours wafted towards us from the open doors of the huge kitchen, which we passed each day at a distance on our way to the refectory, but which we were never allowed to enter. What, then, was our indignation, our dismay, our grief, when on entering the refectory at twelve we found the usual Wednesday dinner, boiled beef with carrots and an orange by way of dessert. Poor little Aggie Wolferton's eyes filled

with tears of anger and disappointment. It took us barely twenty minutes to consume our festive fare, and we returned to mope in the hall, but Gertie and Aggie came not with us, and I idly wondered what mischief they were up to, while I went back to my 'Pickwick Papers.'

An hour later they returned to be inundated with just reproaches by the 'Enfants de Marie,' reproaches that fell on their ears like water on a duck's back. Bursting with information and excitement, they hurled themselves at me, both speaking at once. They had been spying into the nuns' refectory from one of the little turret windows of the ivy-covered tower, usually locked, but left open that day by the negligence of some lay-sister.

'Oh Miriam, you must come and have a look,' groaned Gertie, when I had begged them to speak one at a time. 'The tables were loaded with good things; ducks, geese, lovely savouries, creams, puddings, fruit, sweets; and there the nuns sat gobbling like pigs. They're bound to have awful pains to-night, and that's my one consolation. And Madame Cécile des Sept Douleurs—who is ever preaching mortification and austerity—two thumping platefuls of roast goose and apple sauce, the little, hunch-backed humbug!'

'Gertie, for shame!' cried the more tender-hearted Aggie. 'She cannot help her deformity.'

'No, but she can help gobbling roast goose while we have boiled beef,' retorted the unrepentant Gertie, adding: 'Oh, come along, Miriam, you may just catch them at their dessert.'

My curiosity was now fully aroused, all the more so as I had longed to investigate that mys-

terious old tower. The opportunity presented itself, perhaps never to return, so I rose to follow the little Wolfertons, and without heeding the remonstrances of sundry irate ribbons we three Britons ran to the upper chambers of the ancient, crumbling building. The small turret windows nearly hidden by a mass of untended ivy looked straight into the big refectory windows. With an ordinary cane held at arm's length we might have touched the upper panes, and had one of the nuns lifted her eyes at that moment she could not have failed to see three eager faces peering down at her. But none of our saintly mystics thought of raising either hearts or eyes to Heaven just then, while they quaffed wines, white and red, and ate hot-house fruit, rout cakes, marzipan and chocolate sweets at 5s. per lb., and other expensive dainties. I just caught a glimpse of Mère Clara de l'Amour Mystique's munching jaws, and wondered what sort of a vision she would enjoy at that evening's orisons.

At five Madame Cécile paid us a short visit to see that all was well with us. She began discussing the beauties of that solemn midnight *Te Deum*. To hear her you might have imagined that she had been kneeling in ecstasy before the Blessed Monstranz ever since; but we three Britishers knew better, and naughty Gerty, with a wink at me, interrupted her by irreverently inquiring whether she liked roast goose with apple sauce.

Madame Cécile, irritable by reason of the heavy dinner that still lay undigested in her inside, snappishly bade Miss Gerty raise her thoughts heavenwards, and seek to mortify her body, instead of everlastingly talking of vile food. For poor little

Gerty, who had partaken of nothing but boiled beef and carrots since breakfast, to be exhorted to mortify her senses by Madame Cécile, who had just enjoyed an eight-course dinner, washed down by several different wines, seemed like adding insult to injury. The humour of the situation, however, struck us so forcibly that we all three lay back in our chairs and rocked with helpless laughter; while our sainted mistress and the other pupils, who knew nothing of the treacherous ivy-framed window, watched us with ever-growing amazement, as they asked one another whether those eccentric 'Anglishes' had quite gone off their head.

It seems needless to add that on the following day the 'Enfants de Marie' complained bitterly of the English girls' disgraceful behaviour, when they sat chatting in a foreign tongue, which none of the rest understood, and actually absented themselves for two hours.

Luckily Mère Clara, who had a liking for me, took a lenient view of the case, and decided that it was natural for three foreigners to want to chat in their mother tongue at Christmas time. She chid me gently, however, for running about the place, and wanted to know where we had been.

I truthfully answered that we visited the tower. She took the news more quietly than I expected, never thinking of the turret window. She simply remarked that no pupil must go in there, as the architects considered it unsafe, and for that very reason it was usually kept locked; then she went on to tell me that one hundred years ago 'La grande Rachel' had occupied the older part of the building and there received Napoleon's visits.

CHAPTER VI

My second term began, and with it a wave of extra naughtiness went through the school. As I have already related, Mère Clara, despairing of obtaining even a few worshippers, rendered herself still more unpopular by tightening the reins of discipline, thereby exasperating even the French children, used as they were to the rigours of convent school life. Punishments became the order of the day; but they were silly, harmless, and wholly inefficacious. Bad marks were stolidly dealt out, and when you received three in one week, you lost the 'récompense,' a tiny rosette pinned on to the cape and of a different colour for each division. Other and worse punishments were inflicted in form of a night-cap, which the delinquent had to wear all day. But when some ten to twenty pretty faces appeared enframed in similar caps, the disgrace lost its sting, while the culprits enjoyed the fun as greatly as the onlookers. Then again at each new conviction the unrepentant sinner knelt to kiss the ground, thus picking up and swallowing legions of filthy microbes. Nobody minded this ground-kissing, which went on at various parts of the house during the greater part of the day,

and the lay-sisters liked it, as it helped to clean the waxed floors over which they spent so many weary hours.

The Feast of the Holy Name being also the Feast of Mère Chérubin de Jésus, our venerable foundress and Mother General, came, as a welcome break, to last three whole days. The third Sunday in January we gave over completely to pious exercises and spent it almost entirely in the heavily-drugged air of the charming Gothic chapel, filled with hot-house flowers and lighted wax tapers. Solemn High Mass, solemn vespers and still more solemn benediction followed one after another with scarcely a break. At Benediction that sweetest of all Latin canticles—St. Bernard's 'Jesu, dulcis memoria'—was sung by an exquisite soprano to the accompaniment of the violin and harp. As the melodious strains were wafted through the chapel, amid a blaze of light, the heavy scent of countless hot-house flowers and clouds of incense, rising from over a dozen incensors swung by pretty, little, red-frosted choir boys, I understood how the most stodgy, most stolid individual could conjure forth a series of ecstasies in such an atmosphere. The heavy flower and incense-laden air, the myriads of lighted wax tapers, the pealing organ, the sweet voices of the nuns intermingling with violin, harp and 'cello, drugged the bodily senses, leaving the soul to rise to heights unknown. As in his stinking East End den, the Chinese opium-eater, closing his eyes to sordid surroundings, lets his soul wander forth into an enchanted garden of wondrous beauty, so, among these women and children, many an

hysterical, excitable subject worked herself into an entrancing ecstasy aided thereto by the hot, stifling, and perfumed atmosphere. In such moments a level-headed Économe sent velvet money-bags round.

After Benediction every nun disappeared from our sight for twenty-four hours. The soul having had her turn it was time to think of the body. So Community and Novitiate feasted and junketed as they had done on the 1st of January; while we were marched back to our schoolrooms closely policed by exultant 'Enfants de Marie,' who, to their boundless joy, were set in authority over us till the day following after Benediction. We didn't obey them, it is true; but then we didn't obey the luckless novices, who guarded us in ordinary times, so the results proved much the same. We again smelt the delicious dainties, prepared for our betters, as we passed through the area on our way to the refectory, and again we had to content ourselves with the exhilarating odours, while we consumed our ordinary.

After Benediction of the second day the satiated virgins returned to the higher Mysticism, while we were hurried off to the dormitories to robe ourselves in the white muslin of State occasions, thence to the Salle de Communanté, which we only entered once a year. I saw it that day for the first time. It was a beautiful apartment and corresponded in every detail to the magnificent parlour which stood facing it on the south side of the cloisters. We stood massed up behind a massive oaken table which groaned under the weight of the priceless gifts we offered each year to our foundress. At a given

signal we burst forth into a silly ditty, set to music by a nun, in which we exalted in the most preposterous and exaggerated terms 'notre Mère Générale's virtues and our own glorious privilege in being educated at the "Incarnation"'; while the poor old soul, looking terribly bored, shuffled in, was hoisted on to a raised platform by the dignitaries who ever formed her court, and sat on her throne pulling wimple and veil awry over her wrinkled brow—a knack of hers—till the song came to an end. Then without glancing at the presents, which cost some two or three hundred pounds, she thanked us for our gifts and yawningly shuffled out again.

In the evening some twenty to thirty of the prettiest and most intelligent children, looking adorable as crusaders, templars, knights, gave a theatrical performance, to which the whole Community, the cardinal and two generals of Order, assisted. The Econome again made a roaring profit in the sale of programmes and refreshments. The children, nearly all well provided with money, ate the whole time as children will: the nuns touched nothing, it being a strict conventual rule never to eat in the presence of the laity, who is expected to venerate in the Spouse of Christ an ethereal being, far removed from the wants and infirmities of poor humanity. On the following day we played about as much as we had done on St. Catherine's feast. We paid for all our entertainments, and those who wanted goodies bought them; but as usual, the convent provided but the ordinary, with not so much as an extra course.

And then back to silence, to prayers, to devotions that grew lengthier and lengthier as Lent approached. At last—during the month of March—the devotions to St. Joseph took up such a big slice of the afternoon that Madame Jehan la Pucelle, the only person in the house who appeared to take our education seriously, thought fit to intervene, and having—with no little trouble—silenced the opposition, obtained that her first division, at least, should be exempted from the Josephite celebrations, and remain at its studies under the supervision of Madame Jehan herself. I recall Madame Cécile's anger and disgust when she notified, to those it most concerned, the decision of the authorities. How sarcastically she remarked that since our studies were of more importance than our souls, we had better devote ourselves to the former to the exclusion of all else. The majority of the pupils were as angry as herself, albeit from very different reasons. To kneel in the gallery for hours at a stretch watching their 'toquade' gave them infinitely more delectation than wading hopelessly through a maze of Merovingian kings.

On Shrove-Tuesday the Économe again did a roaring trade in cakes, sweets, and syrups. We received an extra two hours' recreation and wound up the day with some 'tableaux vivants.' Thus strengthened, we rose next morning to encounter the hardships of Lent and entered on that epoch of austerity and meditation, our brow adorned with the Lenten ashes, traced by M. l'Abbé's thumb, to the ominous 'Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.'

Then back to the monotonous routine to which the weekly foot-bath came as a welcome break. Strange to say, the puns wasted hundreds on their magnificent grounds, their Gothic chapel, their painted cloisters, their wainscoted parlours, and Community rooms ; while the wretched little underground bathroom, containing one small zinc bath to accommodate two hundred people and fitted with a single, drizzling, cold water-tap, would have shamed an 8s. 6d. workman's cottage in this country. Our aristocratic Brides of Heaven, however, found it all sufficient. They never bathed—they considered it indecent. To wash their feet up to the ankles once a fortnight, their necks once a week, their hands up to the wrist once a day with as much of the face as the wimple left exposed was all-sufficient for absolute cleanliness. I even remember Sœur T  rese du Sacrement d'Amour, assistant of the novitiate in my time, one day telling us postulants, to whom she explained the Constitutions of the Order, that some of us were far too finicky ; that nuns must not devote too much time to the care of their body and that to wash the neck once a week was ample ; indeed, she only washed hers once a month, as a nun's neck—always covered by the wimple—was never exposed to dust, and therefore required but rare ablutions.

The ' Incarnation ' pupils—those at least, who occupied uncurtained cubicles—were constrained to hold the same theories. We improper ' Anglishes ' always got relegated behind curtains, for fear our shocking habits might scandalise the pure of heart. Baths, however, were optional, and

could be had on payment of fifty centimes a bath. My mother never refused the yearly two pounds ten that obtained for me a nice hot bath twice a week. Most of the other English girls, and some of the more up-to-date French ones, enjoyed the same privilege; but the luckless majority had to content itself with the Friday foot-bath, when the whole school—those who paid for baths excepted—was marched in bands of twelve to the area, policed by two novices, who watched proceedings on behalf of holy modesty. Each child seated herself on the bench while a lay-sister placed a tiny wooden tub containing half a gallon of lukewarm water in front of her, and then to the accompaniment of the rosary recited in chorus, she washed her feet up to the ankles.

Towards Mid-Lent another pleasant thrill ran through the establishment. Mère Générale was in Rome at the time. During the cold months most of our dignitaries wintered in the south in imitation of the 'Smart Set' of our naughty, frivolous outside world. They had lovely houses standing in their own grounds in Cannes, Nice, St. Raphael, Rome, and Genoa, so could afford to do so, and travelled first and second class backwards and forwards without stint. Moreover, the big railway companies allowed all those who wore religious garb to travel under the same conditions as dogs and military, i.e. on payment of one-fifth of the fare. So these grand lady nuns who ranked among the richest householders in Paris used and abused the privilege to quite an unheard-of extent. Well! Notre Mère Générale with her assistant, her

secretary, her infirmarian, and two of the most competent lay-sisters, attached to her sacred person, in the capacity of lady's-maids, having wintered at her Nice house in gay Provence, journeyed to Rome to lay herself and her Constitutions at the Holy Pontiff's feet. The 'Incarnation,' founded just fifty-three years at that epoch was, as yet, but a congregation, the members but sisters, their vows but simple. From the moment Leo XIII deigned to approve their Constitutions they blossomed into an Order, had a right to call themselves nuns, and to pronounce solemn instead of simple vows. As soon as Christ's-Vicar had taken these sweet-smelling modest violets to his pontifical bosom (metaphorically speaking, let me add for the enlightenment of those who love scandal) the glorious news was instantly wired to the twenty-five houses, to be received with an exultant 'Te Deum,' sung in choir, in which the pupils joined. That evening our recreation was prolonged by half-an-hour, during which we were honoured by the visit of Mère Magdalena de Jesus Dolent, the local Neuilly Superior. She held a little discourse, in which she exhorted us to thank Our Lady and the Sacred Heart for the great mercy showered on us from Heaven, who had elected us, unworthy though we were, from among legions of other children to be pupils of the Incarnation. She spoke of the myriads of hapless ones educated outside the pale of this House, blessed among all, with pity and contempt. She went on to say that France, given over to God's enemies, had received that day a grace of which it knew nothing. 'God

loved the Franks.' He loved them far better than He loved other nations ; therefore He raised in their midst blessed orders like oases in the desert, where His stainless Spouses lifted their hands night and day to keep back His wrath from falling on the impious worldlings, and offered their pure bodies and beauteous souls as holocausts for the sins committed outside their sacred enclosure. Thus she meandered on through endless drivel, till her voice began to show faint signs of hoarseness, and several nuns, who were hovering round, swooped down on her to bear her forcibly away, for fear her too great eloquence might endanger her precious health.

If I have not mentioned this Mère Magdalena sooner, it is by no means that she lacked importance. Far from it ! She was an extremely graceful, attractive, pretty woman of forty or thereabouts, who looked quite fifteen years younger. She came of a very good family and brought a big dowry with her, but I think her charm of manner, more than anything else, endeared her to all who approached her. Nuns and children worshipped at her shrine, while seculars thronged the parlours, deeming themselves fortunate in obtaining three minutes' audience with this graceful and gracious personage.

She was delicate, or so she imagined, and during her superiorship posed as a very charming invalid. Had she remained in the world, with husband and children to tend, she would have found scant leisure for imaginary ailments. As Bride of Jesus she did apparently little else, and kept a whole

Community fussing round her, feeding her with dainties, the least of which cost sufficient to give an entire workman's family a substantial mid-day's meal. She nearly always wintered abroad, spent the summer months at fashionable watering-places, sighed and groaned because she could not obtain permission to fast, abstain, scourge her pampered body, recite office in choir, yet complacently consoling herself with the axiom that obedience is better than sacrifice, she lived on the fat of the land, and sweetly smiled on her throng of worshippers.

We spent the bright and merry month of May, the month dedicated to the Queen of Heaven, singing hymns in her honour, carrying her statues and banners in procession round the grounds, wearying her with novenas and rosaries innumerable, and decking her many altars with spring flowers. Yet she, whom we so honoured, appeared to turn a deaf ear to our pleadings, for in the third week of the month a black pall of grief settled on this most virtuous, God-favoured establishment. In our midst there lay dying one Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé, the second most important person of the whole Order, the co-foundress with Mère Chérubin de Jésus, the first mistress of novices, by whom every nun of the 'Incarnation,' save a few of the last-comers, had been fashioned and formed and initiated into the mysteries of supernatural life. Mère Générale, still lingering in the sunny South waiting for a chilly spring to be replaced by summer weather, hastened back to bid her life-long friend and partner a last fare-

well. Then she died, and the sound of weeping and lamentation rose throughout the house. For days—aye weeks—we seemed to do nothing but pray, not so much for her as to her. Anticipating Holy Church, we canonised our saint without first asking leave. From morn till dusk her disciples satiated us, children, with tales of her heroic virtues, her marvellous humility, her extraordinary love of mortification. On all sides you heard nuns exhorting their pupils to pray to 'notre Sainte Mère : 'My child, ask Mère Emmanuel to make you more obedient.' 'Ask our glorified saint to obtain your father's conversion.' 'Ask our Holy Mother to grant you the grace of humility.' If these good ladies were to be believed, no greater saint ever walked this earth. With bated breath one told the other how she had been seen times out of number raised in mid-air while she communed with the Man of Sorrows, as He bent down from the crucifix to give her the kiss of love. Headaches, toothaches, and all those other aches to which poor humanity is heir, were cured by a touch of her garment, her breviary, her rosary beads. And yet—if impartial witnesses are to be believed—it would appear that this Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé, when she walked the earth, had been a very irascible little Irish lady, flying into tantrums on the very slightest provocation, as fond of good cheer as her old partner—Maman Générale—extremely proud of the Heavenly favours which, from her own testimony, were showered on her ; vain of her good birth, her physical charms ; even at seventy-five she retained some remnant of the

great beauty she had possessed in youth ; everlastingly talking about herself, and accepting her novices' adoration as her due. I do not pretend that in all this she differed practically from thousands of Christians, who daily—I hope and believe—enter Heaven's portals. But why elevate this everyday, commonplace Christian, such as can be had at thirteen to the dozen all over the universe, high above her fellow-creatures ?

We gave her royal obsequies. We draped the chapel with black, as well as her stall, on which we placed the crown and palm of victory. In the middle of the aisle, on a stately catafalque, she lay, wearing the crown of roses she first received at her clothing half a century ago. Grand requiem mass was sung, the Cardinal officiated, dozens of bishops, Generals of Orders, noted ecclesiastics assisted, while the Vicar of Christ was represented by his Nuncio, Mgr. Rotelli. After the 'Ite Missa est,' the Community passed in mournful procession before the bier to sprinkle the sainted remains with Holy-water. Mother General, coming last, bent over the dead form, and with face wet with tears imprinted a good-bye kiss on the marble forehead of her childhood's friend, then sobbed aloud as she tottered back to her stall. In the whole chapel not an eye remained dry and I wept with the rest. It was that touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, that spontaneous show of natural human affection that pleased me most of the entire pompous ceremonial. In those rare moments, when Mère Emmanuela allowed herself to forget that she aimed at high mysticism and exalted sanctity,

she may have been a very charming, very tender-hearted little lady. Indeed she must have been; otherwise how account for Mère Générale's very human, very natural, outburst of grief?

Then the dread undertaker and his men approached to perform the last office. They closed the coffin, while we knelt in silent prayer, and the organ sobbed forth the Funeral March. At last they bore her away, followed by the entire Community bearing lighted tapers. But the coffin was not then placed on a hearse and taken to Montparnasse, according to custom. Mère Emmanuel's miracle-working remains were far too precious to be laid to rest indiscriminately among millions of other bodies. Both she and Mother Générale were to sleep their last long sleep on the premises that they had founded with their money, as was after all but their due. So in the centre of the dense wood a charming 'Chapelle ardente,' a veritable Gothic gem, had been built with money collected from pupils past, present, and even future, for the debt had not been liquidated at the time I left the 'Incarnation.'

Under this edifice Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé was laid to rest on that sunny day in early spring. Nuns, children, priests accompanied her, singing the 'De Profundis' in mournful minor key. After the men had closed the tomb, which was to be reopened ten years later to receive Mère Chérubin's body, we left her. But not for long—never for long. Henceforth her grave became a noted place of pilgrimage. Morning, noon and night, in snow and frost, in rain and sunshine, in

winter and summer lay-sisters, novices, nuns and children knelt on the bare ground to invoke her. Not one of us but could boast a miracle performed by her on our behalf. She cured me of my detestable spirit of contradiction and love of arguing, at least Mère Clara de l'Armour Mystique would have it so. For my part I cannot honestly say that the cure proved very efficacious or permanent. But for the time being I let little, mystical Clara drivel on uninterrupted. With a barometer at eighty-five in the shade it really becomes impossible to argue virulently on the subject of popes and cardinals, heresiarchs, and schismatics, who lived and loved some five centuries ago.

A few weeks later another death occurred, a death so unimportant, causing so little commotion in the house, that I doubt whether most of its indwellers know of it to this day. Yet I, at least, suffered when I looked at the empty desk beside me and realised that never again should I see dear Irish Linda's sweet face.

She died before she reached her seventeenth birthday, after five days' illness. The last evening she sat beside me during study, she whispered in my ear that she felt seedy, but would not complain for fear of being sent to the infirmary and made to swallow that nameless concoction which French nuns mis-call tea. We were friends, she and I—that is, in the measure that nuns allowed friendship—meaning a very small measure indeed. That evening I saw her for the last time, The next day she spent in the infirmary, and on the following morning the doctors ordered her removal

to the remote secluded infirmaries of the 'Immaculée' which were usually reserved for serious cases. Two weeks later Mère Clara, after making me solemnly promise not to betray her confidence, told me that Linda had died after a short illness and had been buried at Père la Chaise. I fairly gasped with surprise. Dead! Buried! and not a word mentioned to anyone? No; the children must not know, it might frighten them. But all of us, down to four-year-old Béatrice de Montholon, the tiniest tot at the 'Immaculée,' had gazed on Mère Emmanuel's dead face; the whole school was always present at the nun's lying-in-state.

'Oh that,' ejaculated Mère Clara, 'was quite another matter! It edified, it raised the soul to higher things to contemplate Jesus' chaste Spouses sleeping in their bier. But a lay person—bah!' She then went on to tell me about Linda's last moments. She died of peritonitis, the best doctors being in attendance, the father and mother hastening from distant Belfast to be near their suffering child. Everything that science, good nursing, love, could do, had been done, but the doctors gave no hope from the first. Linda, delicate from birth, had been unable to rally after the operation. She gained consciousness at the last, smiled on her weeping parents, bade them remember little Norah, who was growing up to take her place at their side, received the last sacraments of the Church, then smilingly, willingly, cheerfully surrendered her pure soul to God.

'And so!' I commented, 'Linda, though not a nun, died a beautiful death. So, even lay

people can depart this life in perfect joy and peace ?’

‘Assuredly,’ she returned ; ‘that is if they die in the holy Roman faith, otherwise there can be no salvation for them. Linda belonged to a good Irish Catholic family and I am hopeful that Heaven’s gates will open to admit her, when her purgatory is over.’

‘The same heaven in which your consecrated virgins spend your eternity ?’

‘The same, aye—yet with what a difference. We virgins will follow the Lamb wheresoever He goes. The place of honour near the Trinity’s Throne will be ours by right absolute ; while you seculars, who most of you will owe to our penances and prayers your admittance inside the sacred portals, will stand far below, probably forming a court of honour to those among us, to whom you more especially owe your salvation. At this moment Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé rests in the very centre of the burning ocean of Our Saviour’s divine love, while Linda, even if our prayers have already raised her out of purgatory, stands far, far below.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ I tartly retorted. ‘Nor can you be quite sure. For all you know, Linda may be nearer to the Beatific Vision than Mère Emmanuel, and dearer to her Creator.’

She remained silent one minute from sheer horror of my blasphemous words. When she spoke again her voice trembled, as, shudderingly, she moved away from me.

‘Miriam, you unhappy creature, had another

but myself overheard your criminal words, you must have left this holy house to-night, for you are unfit to dwell among God's saints. Are you so utterly, so irretrievably lost to grace that you dare compare poor, commonplace, little Linda with one who may rank with Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, and other lofty mystics?'

Smarting bitterly at the slight offered my little dead friend, I showed no contrition, but angrily demanded why they had refused Christian burial to one who belonged to their Church.

'We did not refuse her Christian burial,' came the indignant answer; 'M. l'Abbé accompanied the hearse to Père la Chaise, low mass was said for her at the "Immaculée" on the day of the funeral, while those of the professed nuns who were informed of her death prayed for her soul. I, myself, offered my communion on the morning after her death,' concluded Mère Clara, in a tone which implied that if her intercession did not open Heaven's portals to poor secular Linda, nothing else would.

But even this last bit of marvellous good news did not satisfy me, strange as it may sound. I wanted to know why no requiem mass had been sung for Linda's white soul, why no Holy-water had been sprinkled on her fair young body—in one word, why such bombastic rites had been performed round Mère Emmanuel's shrivelled corpse, while Linda's innocent remains had been shovelled away with such indecent haste, her name and memory blotted out from our midst before she lay cold in her grave? Mère Clara, despairing to

make me fathom the tremendous gulf that lay between a secular person, however virtuous, and one of Jesus' most favoured Spouses, changed the subject by telling me how lovingly dear little Linda had been nursed by the infirmarians who never left her side night and day (and in that I know she spoke the truth—everything that the nuns could do to save Linda's life, they most certainly did), how Mère Eugénie de la Tour d'Ivoire (the Polish lady of colossal dimensions) actually honoured the death chamber with her august and imposing presence to speak sweet words of hope and comfort to the dying girl.

'And Mère Générale,' I queried, 'was she present at the last moments?'

Mère Clara vainly endeavoured to point out to me the absurdity of such a question. Notre Mère already did the school tremendous honour in presiding over the 'lecture des notes' and theatrical performances, and in allowing the pupils to offer her expensive gifts on her numerous feast days. Could she in reason be expected to attend the death-bed of each unimportant little school-girl? I ventured to think she ought and could, that her place was at the side of the child to whom she stood 'in loco parentis,' while it lay battling in the throes of the last mortal agony. But I said no more after that; I never mentioned Linda's name again. A few days later, however, I, who rarely asked to be taken into town, begged that Madame Bailly—an impecunious lady and jack-of-all-trades attached to the convent, whose principal office consisted in accompanying pupils outside

the sacred precincts on the rare occasions when necessity required, should take me to Père la Chaise. My request was easily granted. Before going I slipped into my pocket my whole fortune—a five franc piece given me by an aunt, who had paid me a ten minutes' visit in the convent parlour on her way back from the Riviera. With this sum I bought a handful of lilies of the valley, narcissi, and white violets, which I reverently laid on poor, forgotten Linda's lonely grave. When Mère Clara heard from Madame Bailly of my lavish expenditure at an expensive florists, she rated me soundly. Surely, she argued, I, who of the whole school never had a sou to spend, might have kept my five francs for the coming yearly bazaar, or if I must buy flowers, I might have bought them for the altar. What should I look like on the day of the bazaar, when I alone failed to make purchases? I answered that it mattered little how I looked, as no one would trouble to look at me.

Then one lovely day in July the broad allée des Bois, which gave delicious shade during the hottest noon, presented a charming scene. Six 'boutiques' were erected on each side of the broadwalk, each 'boutique' being superintended by a professed nun, who had under her orders a couple of 'Enfants de Marie' and a lay-sister for the rough work. There was the refreshment stall, where delicious two sous cream cakes could be had at ten sous a piece, and cups of mocha, china tea, frothy chocolate, at one franc each. There was the 'boutique des arts,' where portraits of the

'Incarnation' houses and principal 'Incarnation' ladies could be had at five or ten francs—double that sum when a well-beloved virgin's autograph adorned her own photo. At this 'boutique' one could also buy 'enluminures,' i.e. pieces of parchment, hand-painted with a wreath of flowers encircling some hackneyed pious saying of Mère Générale's or Mère Emmanuel's. Nearly all these 'enluminures' were supposed to have been painted by Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent, who dabbled in colours when her precious health allowed. Those bearing her initials were sold at forty francs and upwards, but as she could rarely exert herself, her pupils, who painted as well as she did, if not better, did them all, leaving her to sign her precious M. de J.D., which brought up the price by bounds—a very lucrative if not very honourable trick of the trade. The remaining 'boutiques' were filled with costly knick-knacks sent by the convent's many secular friends among the Smart Set and all sold at fabulous prices, the entire sum going to swell these unsophisticated virgins' already very substantial banking account. One 'boutique' out of the twelve, however, they generously set aside—its proceeds being promised from times immemorial to the Fathers of the 'Incarnation.'

Of these fathers I have said as yet nothing, albeit I might find a good deal to say. They did not, as the name seems to imply, form one and the same Order with the ladies of the 'Incarnation.' They each had their own separate founder, the Père d'Armentières having founded the one, our dear old Maman Chérubin the other. But these

two were friends, had been friends for nearly sixty years, and though each one retained his and her liberty of action they collaborated, in a way of speaking. They both followed the rule of Saint Augustin and their constitutions differed little from each other. The fathers, who lived at a very small distance from us, confessed nuns and children, provided us with a chaplain out of their own number, and gave the school religious instruction. Thus these gentle mothers and excellent fathers were brothers and sisters in Christ, they were friends (an absolutely platonic, pure, and innocent friendship, let there be no mistake about that), excellent friends always willing to share with one another such good things as fell to their share, always ready to stand up for each other against the world in general, and the much-hated Government in particular. They remained friends for over half-a-century, that is until the day they fell out. But when they did quarrel, it was with such hearty good-will that—figuratively speaking—they slammed the door into each other's faces and have never exchanged another word from that day to this. At the epoch of the bazaar 188—, they had not yet quarrelled, but stood at the zenith of their fraternal affections, so—as it happened in all preceding years—a 'boutique' was set apart for the good fathers' sole profit.

Now Mère Clara loved these fathers, she loved them collectively with a chaste and ardent love. During the many lengthy directions with which she favoured me, she everlastingly talked of their qualities, their marvellous talents, their sanctity,

till I grew heartily sick of their very name and they—I grieve to say—were the unconscious cause of my rupture with my kindly little mystic.

On the eve of the bazaar she approached our recreation ground and mysteriously signed to me from afar. When I reached her side she handed me a gold piece, saying: ‘It is for you, Miriam. Madame l’Économe and I, after thoroughly discussing the matter, have come to the conclusion that it would never do for you to leave the bazaar—alone of all the school—empty-handed. So Madame l’Économe sends you these twenty francs, which she will slip on to your bill as extras.’

‘My mother does not believe in spending money to give me presents, treats, or pleasures of any kind,’ I reminded her.

‘I know, I know, poor child! But then your mother always pays your bills without protest as well as without comment in less than forty-eight hours. It is a great deal more than many of the other parents do,’ concluded poor Clara with a groan, which proved to me without a doubt that, in spite of all their financial cleverness, the nuns suffered from that universal disease termed bad debts as well as less-sainted mortals.

I clutched the gold piece greedily, it being the first I had ever possessed. Already I speculated on the many grand things I resolved to buy, not once taking into consideration the enormous prices fixed on the most valueless objects, nor realised how very little my solitary gold piece would fetch. Mère Clara interrupted my unclouded reflections by seeking to obtain from me the promise

that I should spend my fortune at the 'boutique des Pères,' tenderly adding that the beloved fathers were so greatly in need of a little pecuniary help. I compromised by consenting to give this particular stall my closest inspection, but my manner proved neither very convincing nor reassuring as I bade her adieu at the schoolroom door. I knew for a fact that the 'Incarnation' Fathers were extremely well off. They were not only regular priests; they were, above all, editors—editors of a kind of 'comic' paper, widely circulated among the lower working classes. This rag, which appeared each Friday, was filled with the most inane, idiotic, and oft-times most indecent jokes and pictures, all aimed at the Government. To make the third Republic ridiculous in the eyes of the man in the street seemed the principal object in life of these monastic worthies. What wonder if a long-suffering Government at last turned them neck and crop out of the country to take their funny sayings elsewhere?

The next day, lost in a crowd of smartly-dressed women and married men over forty—brothers, cousins, bachelor uncles were not allowed inside the enclosure—I wandered alone, dressed, like the other pupils, in my Sunday uniform. I went to the 'boutique des Pères,' according to my promise, but could see nothing to tempt the gold piece out of my pocket. There were the photos of every father in every known attitude, all bearing the Reverend's 'autograph.' There were big volumes of the pious comic paper all bound in red and gold. There were numerous objects of devotion blest by their hands,

and expensive 'objets d'art' sent by their ardent admirers and fairest penitents, but nothing for me. I trudged on till I reached the bookstall, the least frequented of the twelve booths. Here I spent long hours rummaging till I espied a complete volume of Corneille published at twelve-and-six. I pounced on it, but alas, Madame Gertrude de la Croix asked for thirty francs! Sadly I turned away, when she recalled me to kindly comfort me with the assurance that if the book was still available at five, the closing hour, I might have it for twenty francs, and she concluded by saying that I could already look on the book as mine; few ladies and no pupils caring anything for the classics. Partially comforted I turned away and wandered all over the park, carefully keeping well out of Mère Clara's reach, though from a distance I watched her being graceful to many an arrogant dame of high degree. At one time—I learnt afterwards—she was called away by the portress to interview several gentlemen who requested to see her. She proceeded to the parlour there to find some twenty urchins in their teens in whom she mostly recognised cousins and brothers of our pupils. They sat in a row, their faces hidden in their handkerchiefs. Piteously they implored the amused nun to let them go to the 'Allée des Bois.' They promised to be good boys, they would not glance at the 'Jeunes filles,' but spend all their money at the devotional stalls. Mère Clara proved adamant; it was useless to insist, she told them. They knew the rules and must abide by them. No unmarried male over six or under forty could be

admitted into the lambs' fold. 'Tell me what you desire to purchase, dear lads,' she concluded, 'and the lay-sisters shall bring you the things. Well, what are they to bring you ?'

'Dollies !' whimpered one rascal.

'Cakes !' howled another.

'Ices !' sobbed the chorus.

'Very well ; wait patiently here and you shall have what you ask for. Let me also add some beads blest by the Holy Father and some pious pictures that have touched our saintly Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé's chaste body, for I trust you are trying to be good pious lads, who daily pray to Mary and never miss your Sunday Mass.'

With these words she disappeared and a little later elderly lay-sisters, whose beauty—like that of the daughters of Jerusalem—was all interior, came into the parlour bearing heavily-laden trays. The youngsters gobbled as if they had been starved for a week, and then to their disgust they were made to buy beads, medals, scapulars, and even smartly dressed dolls, so the laugh remained with the nuns, while they—making a virtue of necessity—stalked out of the convent, each with a doll sitting upright on his arm and walked in a row down the street, to the intense joy of the Neuilly street youth.

At five o'clock I returned to the nigh deserted alley and rushed to the bookstall, where my Cornille awaited me, as Madame Gertrude de la Croix prophesied. True to her promise she held it out to me, but when I handed her my gold piece she asked me if I had been to the refreshment stall. I shook my head and the kindly little woman gave me back

five francs saying: 'You may as well have the volume for fifteen francs, as we have done extremely well with the books of devotion and the fiction. Those dry-as-dust classics never fetch a sou, and I have told my friends a dozen times not to send me any more.'

Thanking her for her generosity, I went to the refreshment stall, where our children were raffling the remains. I enjoyed a delicious meal of frothy vanilla chocolate, cream cakes and ices. Then I followed the others back to the schoolroom, hugging my precious Corneille under my arm, when I came face to face with Mère Clara. Guiltily I started and tried to hide the book, but already she had seen it and understood. Reproachfully she gazed at me and then turned away, saying bitterly:

'I despair of you, Miriam, for you are heartless. I obtained you that money in the hope that it might benefit our dear fathers, and now you have spent the whole sum on a rubbishy book you could have had from the library by applying to the Sister librarian.' She was gone before giving me time to express my sorrow and remorse at having pained her, nor did she speak to me again for some months.

With that episode ended my school life, the only life I had ever known since I reached my fourth birthday. A couple of days later a lay-sister appeared at the door of the big class to summons Mademoiselle Miriam to Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent's presence.

Surprised, I rose to follow Sœur Pasqualine to the charming quarters inhabited by this lofty being, wondering what she could have to say to one so

obscure and unimportant as myself. She received me with her accustomed sweetness, began by saying a few words of Mère Clara and to deplore our rupture, and remarked that she thought I might have spent a few francs at the Père's 'boutique' to please one who had shown me so much kindness, but that—the money being mine—no one had a right to call me to account as to the manner in which I chose to spend it. Then she explained that she had sent for me to tell me that I must leave the school, as I had long since passed the age-limit, and join the lady boarders at the 'Immaculée' on the following Monday. It would not be fair to the rest of the first division to allow me, who was so much older and more advanced than the other pupils, to compete for the prizes. She hoped that I should be comfortable at the 'Immaculée' and that I must come and see her from time to time.

A shudder ran through me at the thought of having to dwell henceforth among these dreary old women, whose life lay behind them while mine had scarce begun. I asked the Superior what was to become of me eventually, whether my mother sometimes wrote to the nuns and mentioned my home-coming.

Mère Magdalena hesitated a minute as she threw me a sympathetic glance, then she said as she stroked my hair: 'It is a pitiful thing to have to tell a child that her own mother does not want her—never has wanted her, yet it is best to look the truth straight in the face, my poor little Miriam. Your mother writes often, urgently entreating us to persuade you into entering the Church and taking the veil. We

answer her back each time that we force nobody, that those who come to us must do so willingly, joyfully, and of their own free-will. Yet, indeed, my child, it would be far the best thing for you, otherwise I hardly know what is to become of you.'

'Yet, if I refuse to become a Catholic nun—what then?'

'Then you must stay with us indefinitely as a lady-boarder until your parents die, and you have a little money of your own. You cannot force your way into your father's house if your mother refuses to have you there, and you cannot live alone without resources of any kind, at your age. But why will you not become one of us? Do you dislike us? Do you think us wicked?'

'No! No!' I hastened to reply, and with perfect truth. 'I know that you are everything that is good and kind and sweet, and I like you, as who would not? But I far from approve of many of your teachings and ideas.'

'That is because you have not studied our holy religion. I will see that the "Immaculée" librarian supplies you with books. Read, pray, study, and one day you will return to tell me that you, too, wish to join the favoured virgins.'

She signed my brow with the sign of the cross; she kissed and dismissed me. Three months later to the day her prophecy was fulfilled, but how it reached its fulfilment I will relate in Part II.

PART II
AS A LADY-BOARDER

CHAPTER I

BUT now how to explain why I, who for one whole year lived among Catholic nuns tacitly disapproving, secretly ridiculing and condemning many of their customs, their ideas, their sayings, should suddenly of my own free-will, without coercion, ask them to admit me, not only to their Church, but also to their Order? To say that the nuns forced me to take this step by ill-treatment or threats would be not only ridiculous, but an absolute falsehood. They left me severely alone, and when they did seek to influence me—moral persuasion, sweet honeyed words, supplied their only weapons. I learnt in after days that my mother promised them one hundred pounds a year to take me entirely off her hands. They needed money, needed it badly, there can be no doubt of that. They possessed some twenty-three houses—without counting some ten or twelve country and sea-side villas—to keep up in pomp and magnificence. Nearly all of the twenty-three stood on their own superb grounds, with spacious chapels attached. Moreover if they were to be believed, the French Government bled them freely, possibly to avenge itself for the invectives these saintly ladies were for ever hurling at it. An extra

hundred was not to be despised, and I, being young, healthy, well-educated, and speaking five languages fluently, could be of great use in a teaching Order. But nothing of all this reached my ears at the time. Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent dismissed me with gentle words; Mesdames Jehan la Pucelle and Cécile des Sept Doleurs did likewise, and unaccompanied henceforth by lay-sisters or obnoxious 'Enfant de Marie,' I walked slowly through the park to the 'Immaculée' where Madame Augustine de Sainte Marie, a charming English nun, received me graciously. She took me into the lady-boarder's dining-room for a little talk, for I must be made acquainted with the lady-boarder's rules. They were few in number; but must be rigorously observed. The first was never to speak to pupil, novice, postulant, or young professe under any circumstances. The second, never to post any letter, carry outside message, or make purchases for any member of the convent without special permission; and the third, never to be out after eight—closing time. I promised to observe these rules, easy enough as far as I myself was concerned. Then she went on to entreat me not to quarrel with the boarders. They were old, most of them. If younger, they were old-maidish, eccentric, always ready to complain and grumble, especially about their food; to quarrel over the merits and demerits of each one's particular pet priest or favourite nun, and to squabble everlastingly concerning the all-absorbing topic of shut and open doors or windows. It could not be termed a sinecure to be surveillante of the lady-boarders, she ended with a sigh;

and I sighed too out of self-pity as I realised the dreary life that lay before me—a girl scarce twenty amid these beldames in their dotage.

Madame Augustine then terminated the interview by taking me to my room—a comfortably furnished cell heated in winter by hot-water pipes—and left me after begging me always to wear bedroom slippers when in my own quarters; for under me there lived a tartar in both senses of the word; a Russian princess who had been twice divorced; (Madame Augustine did not vouchsafe me this piece of information; I obtained it from other sources) and went into quite muscovite fits of temper when she heard footsteps overhead. I instantly unbuttoned my boots and promised to remain in my stockings till the *Sœur lingère* from the big convent brought over my things. When the door closed behind her, I turned to the books, with which a fair-sized table was loaded. Here I found the lives of Francis and Dominique, Teresa and Gertrude, Loyola and Borgia, Catherine and Mechtilde, and numerous other mystics; also universal, papal and church histories written from a most rabid Catholic point of view. Now began a strange life for a girl not twenty. I lived in solitude and silence alone with my books. The glamour of the Middle Ages cast its golden hue around me. Visions of Crusaders performing their gallant feats-of-arms, of magnificent Templars, of Valois' brilliant court filled my mind to the exclusion of all else. From them I turned to the stories of the saints. With Teresa I lingered in the moonlit cloisters of Toledo, with Gertrude and Mechtilde I wandered through the mediæval

Rhenish monasteries, the ruins of which I had seen when passing through the Rhineland. I had always loved the Middle Ages; now I loved them still more. I only lay my books aside to go to the chapel at the big convent, and there in the drugged atmosphere of heavy blossoms, scent and incense, I dreamt dreams and had visions in the full light of day; while the nuns' sweet voices came gently wafted from the gallery, as they melodiously sang the lovely Latin hymns and anthems set to music by the greatest masters of all ages.

And then my mother came to see me. She and father did not cross the Channel for that purpose, but to put in an expensive and enjoyable fortnight at the Paris Grand Hotel. One afternoon she found time to drive over to Neuilly and spend a short hour with the little recluse, her own daughter, whose life differed so utterly from her own. We sat alone in the vast parlour of the big convent, and she, like Uncle Julius, admired the lovely grounds, now wearing their most gorgeous autumn tints. She greeted me kindly, and after a few minutes' desultory conversation, I inquired whether she came to fetch me home for good.

She looked annoyed. Why should I wish to return to England, she wanted to know? Could I not make myself happy with my books amid such glorious surroundings? Was I not well cared for, well fed, kindly treated? What more could I possibly ask of life?

'It isn't that I ask anything particular of life, except that you cannot reasonably expect me to

spend it alone in a nun's cell,' I deprecatingly explained.

'Why shouldn't you join the Community?' she asked, as she contemplated a group of frolicsome virgins sporting 'inter liliās.'

'I'm not even a Catholic, much less a nun.'

'But what prevents you becoming a Catholic? I have never known you a very staunch Protestant so far. Many of the most charming, most virtuous women in society belong to the Catholic persuasion, and are none the worse for that.'

'Mother,' I asked point-blank, without heeding her last remark, 'why have you kept me in school since babyhood; why do you still seek to keep me here, a young woman nearing twenty? Why am I not to come home, go into society, and marry like my sisters?'

'Because, Marion,' she retorted, following my lead and speaking in sharp, decisive tones; 'because I have no home to offer you. I have taken your three sisters out and found them husbands; I do not intend beginning a fourth time for you. We are tired of pleasuring, your father and I' (I could believe that without difficulty). 'I am equally tired of managing a big house and numerous servants, so we have decided to give up our home, now your sisters and brothers are settled in life, and take rooms in the Westminster Palace Hotel.'

'And cannot I join you there?'

'Impossible! Hotel life is expensive, and you would greatly add to our expenditure. Moreover, how would you employ your time? You surely do not propose going into society all by yourself to

search for a husband? Nor could you remain alone, when we went to the German waters or the Riviera. After a pause, she continued: 'Do you dislike the convent; do the nuns treat you harshly? Are they bad, immoral women, as some will have? If I thought so, I would not leave you another hour under their roof. But friends of mine recommended the Incarnation and spoke most highly of it.'

'Your friends only spoke the truth. The nuns treat no one harshly, and they are most virtuous, moral women. They are just like other people—good ordinary people with the defects and qualities you meet daily in your own circle. But they are childish, puerile, and vain—oh, terribly vain and conceited! They think themselves miles better than their neighbour.'

'We all think ourselves miles better than our neighbour. Why shouldn't we? It pleases us and doesn't harm the neighbour, who cherishes an equally good opinion of himself,' answered my mother, with that terse common-sense that ever distinguished her. 'You bear with the nuns' little faults, and they will bear with your big ones. But now I must say good-bye, as your father and I intend going to the opera to-night, and I shall want plenty of time to dress.'

I could not deny myself one parting shaft, 'I believed you and father had tired of gaieties?'

She recommended me to cure myself of my impertinence before I pronounced my final vows, and slipped half-a-sovereign in my hand as she kissed me good-bye. 'No use in giving you more,'

she explained; 'you can have no use for fine clothes if you sit all day reading in a cell. You never cared for sweetmeats, and the convent library must contain more volumes than you can get through in a lifetime.'

I agreed to all this, and assured her that I didn't even need the half-sovereign. She bade me, however, keep it. At the door she turned, kissed me again and said kindly :

'You need not be a nun unless you like, dear. Next June, on the day of your twenty-first birthday, the doors of this building will stand wide open to let you pass. But I think you will make a great mistake if you leave this beautiful, peaceful abode. You would not lead a very happy life alone with me and father. However, suit yourself. Make your own free, deliberate choice. None shall coerce or force you.'

With these words she departed. I watched her hasten down the stone stairs, across the large carriage-drive to her own hired vehicle. I then returned to the parlour and stood gazing on the now silent garden for nearly an hour. Possibly that hour decided of my fate. I thought, with a shiver, of that big outside world of which I knew nothing, and finally came to the conclusion that my mother might be right—that the 'better part' was also the safest. Nuns were simply women in conventual garb; they possessed the same qualities and faults as their secular sisters. Then I thought of Teresa of Avila, Gertrude, and Mechtilde. Perhaps I should rise like they to the highest summit of supernatural life. How glorious to revel in ecstasies

and visions as they did. So, determined to believe henceforth in the Catholic dogma, I turned from the window to retrace my steps to the 'Immaculée' cell I inhabited. At that moment the forgotten gold piece rolled to the ground. I wondered how I could spend it, when I caught sight of Mère Clara as she wandered through the grounds, deep in her breviary. A sudden thought struck me. I wanted sympathy and kindness—I felt so alone. Calling out her name, I pursued her rapidly. She turned and waited for me to approach. I held out my gold piece and breathlessly explained :

'See, ma mère, what my mother, who has just been to the parlour, gave me. Here, take it; it is for the Incarnation Fathers. I've been filled with remorse all along that I grieved you at the bazaar.'

She smiled, looked pleased, but pushed back my offering. 'Nay, dear,' she said; 'I would not rob you of your little all. Madame Bailly must take you for a day's outing into Paris. You get little enough pleasure, poor child!'

But I pressed the money into her unwilling hand, and begged her not to pain me by a refusal, as otherwise I should take it as a sign that she had not forgiven me.

'No use to go and see the sights of Paris,' I told her; 'I have this moment renounced a world I never knew, for I am resolved to join the wise virgins, to whom all the best seats are allotted in Kingdom Come.'

Then she opened her arms and literally clasped me to her breast. She was so pleased, she told

me, and all the other nuns would be the same. All had prayed for me to become one of themselves—all; they wanted me!

They wanted me! How sweet it sounded, after that rather sad interview with a mother who had never wanted her own child. In after years it got forced on me that they wanted me with the hundred pounds, but not without. Just then, however, I gave no thought to the pecuniary side of the transaction; indeed I knew nothing of it, and my sad, lonely heart thrilled at the sound of each kind word.

The news of my conversion ran like wildfire through big and little convent, that is, among the professed nuns. Pupils, lay-sisters, postulants, and novices were never allowed to know what went on around them. But all the big wigs stopped me in the hall and staircase to kiss and congratulate me, leaving me with the comforting idea that henceforth I must regard myself as a chosen vessel of the Lord—lifted high above my fellow-creatures to become a virginal saint of great importance. •

A couple of days later I received my first and very salutary damper. It came from a charming young English girl—not a Romanist; but so ultra-ritualistic that it seemed hard to distinguish. She boarded at the ‘Immaculée’ during the summer while awaiting the cold weather, when she intended proceeding to our Nice house, according to her doctor’s orders. Sternly she rebuked me and took me to task, for she and I had grown very intimate during that summer, as was only natural for two young English girls stranded among some

twenty Continental dames of uncertain age, and, still more, uncertain temper.

‘If you embraced monastic life from conviction, and went over to Rome for the same reason,’ she argued, ‘you still would command my respect and esteem. But you are taking up a life to which you are totally unsuited, simply as a *pis-aller*. Answer me with perfect truth, if a comfortable happy home, with loving parents, sisters and brothers awaited you on the other side of the Channel, together with the future prospect of a kind husband and little children of your own, what would you do?’

‘Pack my boxes, or, rather, leave my scanty worthless possessions behind me, and take the night boat train to the other side of the Channel,’ I answered, with terse unhesitating promptitude. ‘Oh, Ethel, such a life as you paint, just such a happy, quiet English family life, is my ideal of happiness. For smart society and its dissipations I never could have cared. But that quiet home life, where parents and children worship the same God, and are bound together by the closest ties of true affection, must be—according to me—the only true Utopia this world can ever know. But there,’ I sighed, ‘I have never known a home, nor shall ever know one.’

‘Many people have never known a home,’ retorted Ethel, drily; ‘but they are not false to their religious convictions for that reason.’

‘Then, what would you have me do?’ I impatiently queried.

‘Be a woman; face life. Make your own existence. Work, suffer, be independent! Con-

quer fate, and make yourself that home you dream of.'

'Yes,' I sarcastically retorted. 'Walk out of this house next June with all my worldly possessions on my back, without a two sous piece in my pocket, for I have just given my last ten francs to Mère Clara as peace-offering. Wander through the streets of Paris, not knowing where to sleep at night—I, who have never crossed the road by myself. Live on air and brave resolutions till I find work, even supposing that anybody will be silly enough to employ me, picking me off the pavement without decent clothes or references. No, Ethel, a young woman who has been incarcerated since babyhood cannot suddenly go forth into an unknown world, without friends or money, to earn an independent living. No; the convent is all that fate has to offer me. And why not? Teaching children is a noble, useful life! I may, with God's blessing, become a good, holy woman. At any rate I mean to try.'

CHAPTER II •

AND then a big piece of good luck came my way. My mother, on her visit to the convent, conversed, it appears, with one of the head nuns—I know not which one—before the portress summoned me to the parlour. It was decided between the two that mother should pay one hundred pounds a year as long as I remained an inmate of the convent, but no coercion or restraint must be used to detain me, if I wished to go, on reaching my majority. At my parent's death my share of the inheritance was to be handed to the nuns, provided I found myself bound to their Order by irrevocable vows. For the rest, my mother gave the consecrated lady to understand that the convent must find me in everything—clothes, doctor's and dentist's attendance; pocket-money, if they chose—she did not insist. Visits to the country and seaside also, if they chose—she did not consider them necessary. But she did not expect to receive bills of any kind; she washed her hands of me entirely. Henceforth I belonged to the nuns, while she attended to her share of the transaction by sending a twenty-five pound cheque each quarter-day. The nun acquiesced in all this willingly, joyfully, and they parted on the best of terms.

The day after my argument with Ethel Tempest, Mère Clara, who had again made herself responsible for my morals, came into my cell to make me an offer, at which I jumped for joy. The National Lourdes pilgrimage was leaving Paris that evening under the guidance of the Incarnation Fathers. In order to profit by the cheapness of the pilgrimage train, the nuns wanted to send a lay-professess-novice to Poitiers; while Lourdes sent them, in return, a choir novice, about to make her one year's novitiate, which can only be performed at the mother-house, who could travel back on the second-half of the return ticket, which, by the way, was more or less a fraud, but a fraud the nuns continually committed. Nuns must not travel alone. Would I go with the pilgrimage, stay one day at Poitiers, three at Lourdes, and return with the new novice? I, who love new sensations, agreed joyfully. To visit the century-old Cathedral of Poitiers, the mediæval Abbaye of Sainte Radegonde; to see the snow-capped Pyrenees; to witness such miracles as Our Redeemer performed in Galilee two thousand years ago!—it would be glorious!

At six o'clock we went in a four-wheeler to the Gare de l'Ouest, a little Spanish lay-novice and myself. On the huge platform a scene of indescribable confusion met the eye. Monks, nuns and secular priests in their hundreds rushed hither and thither, their habit ballooning about their legs in most comical fashion. Lay people hustled them on all sides, shouting, joking, gesticulating as only Frenchmen can; while among them lay

—oh, pitiable sight!—scores of miserable wretches stricken with every disease and infirmity known to medical science, even to the most hideous and repulsive. Groans, sobs, cries for water, rent the air on all sides, while every now and then the call for a priest to come and administer the last sacraments rose high above the din. The porters looked as if sanity had departed from them for ever, as they tried to sort the pilgrims according to the colour of the rosette each one sported on the breast. My little sister and I wore the red one to indicate that we travelled by the red train—the last one. The white train, the one containing the worst, and in many cases dying invalids, was going first, and even now the ‘brancardiers’ hoisted stretchers into the compartments amid the agonising shrieks of pitiful wretches.

One little comedy came to alleviate the horror of the scene. First, I must remark that I often sought to discover some adequate reason for the animosity displayed by the Gallican Church towards the French Government, the big railway companies, and other magnates of that country, for a more kindly Government and more kindly companies in their dealings with clerics it would be difficult to find. As I have already explained, all those who wore priestly or religious garb might travel at the same rate as dogs and military, while the numerous pilgrimage trains were run more cheaply than the cheapest excursion train in this country. I should like to see one of our big companies treat clerics with such courtesy and generosity. If they did, English ecclesiasts would

show some gratitude, let us hope. Not so in France! The priesthood accepts all kindness offered them as a matter of course, and asks for more. Indeed, I have oft-times heard Incarnation nuns observe that they did worldlings great honour in accepting their presents, and thereby affording them the means of making their salvation.

At the starting of the pilgrimage, three holy brothers—I know not of which Order—came hobbling across the platform in search of the station-master. Two of them, stalwart peasants, held between them a repulsive-looking cripple. They wanted to take their beloved, infirm brother to Lourdes; so explained the two whole ones, who were only a degree less brutish and idiotic-looking than the aforesaid beloved brother, to a harassed, exhausted, much-enduring station-master. They wanted to travel by the red train, it being the most expensive, and for that reason the most comfortable. But they also wanted to travel without paying their fare. Their wants were legion. The perplexed chef-de-gare, looking more perplexed than ever, could but shake his head; the brothers must pay for their tickets; small as the cost was, it must be paid. The two, both talking together, explained further: ‘Monsieur did not understand. They were God’s poor; they had no money. Surely it was a most sacred duty and honour for all good Christians to provide for such as they. Did not Monsieur le Chef-de-Gare consider himself a good Christian? Would he prevent Notre Dame de Lourdes from curing their afflicted brother? Think of the honour that must redound on Mother Church,

on the Blessed Mother of the grotto—think of the immense profit to M. le Chef-de-Gare's own soul, if our dear brother returned cured.' But monsieur could not or would not see the force of these specific arguments. Over-worked, dead-beat, extenuated with passengers and porters tugging at him from all sides, his vast stock of admirable patience at last gave way. 'No, pilgrims who could not pay, must not be allowed to travel. If you have no money,' he gruffly told them, 'go back to your convent and pray to Notre Dame de Lourdes. If she can perform miracles in the department of the Basses Pyrenées, she can also perform them in the department of the Seine.' The brothers seized his sleeve, they cried, they whimpered, they implored; but all to no avail. They must pay or stay in Paris. The company already found itself hundreds of pounds out-of-pocket through these sacrés pilgrimages, to say nothing of the trouble they occasioned. Here was the Orleans express waiting since eight for the line to clear, and all the night's traffic thereby thrown out of gear.

So the callous official turned his back on the whimpering friars—aye, actually whimpering as they slowly edged their way through the dense crowd, crying on all good Christians on earth and glorified souls in Paradise to hasten to their assistance.

The red train's departure had just been signalled, when, by dint of much coaxing and whining, these pitiful caricatures of manhood had collected sou by sou their fares, minus two francs. One of them ran back to the station-master to show him the

harvest of coppers. The latter, after counting it, drew from his own pocket the missing two-franc piece and flung it into the mendicant's filthy paw, then, with a look of ineffable disgust at the latter's tear-stained, blotchy face, pointed with his thumb over his shoulder to the ticket office.

At last we were off, and as the station-master slammed the door of our compartment, I heard him say to a subordinate: 'Ah, Sacré Tonnerre! so that is over for this year, and why couldn't the Sainte Vierge have chosen another line for her miracles.'

We travelled all night, and reached Poitiers in the grey dawn of a chilly September morn. Was ever daylight greeted with more heart-felt gratitude than that which rose from my heart as I alighted from the evil-smelling, microbe-infested, stuffy compartment in which fourteen human beings sat all through that summer's night, with tightly closed windows. My thirteen companions, of whom six wore religious garb, spent the dreary hideous hours alternately screaming canticles, shouting their beads, eating, snoring, and alas, quarrelling! Aye, and the consecrated virgins were more bitter in their invectives than their secular sisters. My own little lay-sister, however, took no part either in the prayers or the squabbles. As I have already remarked, the Sisters of the Incarnation belonged to the most blue-blooded aristocracy of Holy Church; so that even the lowliest among them would have considered it *infra dig.* to shout and squabble in a public vehicle—not but they quarrelled bitterly among themselves,

safe behind their enclosure out of hearing of pupils and seculars. But even their worst feuds were conducted with a certain decorum that proclaimed them gentlewomen; even when at their worst. Judge of my surprise and indignation on hearing nuns belonging to other congregations using a language that would have made an Apache blush! Taking advantage of a moment when hostilities raged fiercest, I surreptitiously let down my window. But alas, my endeavours were frustrated before the second whiff of fragrant night air rushed through our filthy den! With a word that I heard that day for the first time, but which since I have once or twice encountered on the lips of Paris cabbies in the last stage of tipsy fury, a nun, clad in blue and white—the colours of Heaven's fair queen—bade me close it.

The days spent at Poitiers were full of undiluted joy. Having delivered my Iberian companion to the Incarnation of that town, I wandered from dawn till dark—keeping as far as possible from the crowd of noisy pilgrims—through the mediæval parts of the old town. Long hours I spent in the dim, grey aisles of St. Radegonde's ancient Abbey, and when a glorious harvest moon shed its radiant beams on the mysterious arched cloister of the eighteen hundred years' old Cathedral, I stayed in it as long as a good-humoured verger would permit. I at last returned to the convent, to be received with a well-deserved reprimand from a sharp-tongued superior, who ended it by informing me that she could not put me up for the night, as the greater part of the house was in the hands of the

workmen; that I should sleep at their chaplain's flat over the way, where his sister—a kindly maiden of advanced years—would give me a cordial welcome.

Her welcome was indeed cordial—far too cordial, and so was her brother's. I, who longed for bed, had to follow them into their comfortless, scantily furnished sitting-room and partake of a nameless concoction vaguely flavoured with colt's-foot; while the red-faced, heavy-jawed, bullet-headed clerical catechised me concerning London, the Royal Court, and every single peer mentioned in Debrett. Vainly I expostulated. I was but a poor little commoner, who could not hope to have dealings with the favoured few. He refused to accept my excuses, so I invented what I did not know, describing the Princess of Battenberg's, the Duke of Manchester's and the Earl of Rosebery's features, failings, pet hobbies and little peculiarities, as if I had lived all my life under the same roof with this coterie of the rich and rare, until my host at length allowed me to retire.

Another day's wandering round Poitiers, another hideous night in the pilgrims' train, and I awoke next morning to see the sun gilding the snow-clad tops of the eternal mountains. It was nearly nine before we managed to extricate ourselves from the narrow streets of the tiny hamlet of Lourdes, only being able to move through the dense crowd at the rate of a quarter of a mile per hour. What feelings of devotion I may have harboured had long since departed, as I watched with disgust and aversion the hideous scene before me. It reminded me of the Sainte Germaine's

ginger-bread fair I had once visited in early childhood. On all sides hawkers screamed the merits of their wares into your ear. Bargaining, haggling, quarrelling, filled the air. Here an unkempt male of the roughest hooligan type held some hideous statue before your eyes; there a bleary-eyed harridan dangled beads in front of you. Scapulars, blest by Bernadette on her death-bed, rags belonging to that young lady's peasant ancestry, and other pious objects, could be had at the most exorbitant prices. Tallow candles, violently painted pictures, medals, worth a farthing elsewhere, here fetched fifty times that sum.

At last, at last, we emerged from the noisy, narrow thoroughfare into the open country. The glorious panorama that now unfolded before our eyes compensated for all past unpleasant experiences. The white-topped Pyrenees rose high into a sky of cloudless blue. Country houses and stately convents stood here and there on wooded heights. Orchards, meadows, woodlands descended in gentle slope on each side of the Gave, which wended its silvery way in picturesque zig-zag from the mountain heights to the Bay of Biscay. The Incarnation convent stood on a wooded eminence just opposite the miraculous grotto, only separated from it by the tinkling stream and a flowery meadow. The nuns received me with their accustomed sweetness, and clamoured for news of the mother-house, as if I could possibly give them any. But to the nun exiled to a local house, Neuilly is as the Promised Land to Moses. Nothing too puerile, too ludicrous, too absurd, but will amuse and divert these

small petty minds filled with their own Liliputian affairs, their comical conceits and vanities, to the utter exclusion of all else. The most burning political and social questions of the day pass unheard and unheeded on the other side of their walls. Battles may be lost and won, kings exiled, governments fall. Earthquakes and volcanoes, floods and fires, may send thousands to their death. A disastrous winter may fill the great city behind their walls with countless starving children. What care they? If a pupil or lady-boarder, coming from outside, hints at such occurrences they yawningly shrug their shoulders, while the last caprice or tantrum of a beloved, if peevish, troublesome superior, the election of a new *économ*e or sacristan, the arrival of Mother General or some other magnate from another house, the preparation of theatricals, the purchase of a birthday present for Notre Mère, sends these comical old maids into fits of hysterical excitement.

I was supposed by these excellent, naïve ladies to spend the entire three days praying in front of the grotto; as a matter of fact, I spent the greater part of them wandering on lonely mountain heights far from the din and crush of two thousand noisy devout pilgrims. Yet my favourite walk took me oft-times past that wondrous spot, said to be hallowed more than half-a-century ago by the feet of the purest of virgins. So that several times a day I lingered some ten minutes in the whirlpool to gaze around me.

There stood inside the grotto the well-known statue of Notre Dame de Lourdes, the surrounding

rocks being so densely covered with crutches, ear-trumpets and other surgical instruments as to be invisible. On the left side of the grotto, at about ten feet from the ground, was a pulpit, occupied the greater part of the day by priests come from all known dioceses, nations, and parishes of this earth. In front of the grotto stood endless rows of benches and prie-dieux, where the faithful knelt in rowdy prayer, crying aloud to Mary to cure them, to give them the spiritual or temporal blessings they had travelled so far to seek. Nearly all—I might without exaggeration say—all the blessings appeared to be temporal or bodily ones. Few pilgrims stood in need of spiritual gifts. One dear old lady, who prayed assiduously from morn till night, and whose ardent fervour won my admiration, told me in a moment's expansiveness that she entreated Mary to make her a widow before the end of the pilgrimage, as her gouty old man badly needed eternal rest, while she needed still more badly the insurance money due to her on the day following the funeral.

A little further to the right of the grotto stood the piscines, where from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M., wretched incurables afflicted with every kind of repulsive disease were plunged into the ice-cold water, held screaming under it, while the bathers scampered through a breathless Ave Maria; then replaced dripping wet into their loathsome bandages and on the stretcher, which 'brancardiers' carried back to its place in front of the grotto. The men and women's piscines had separate entrances; the sexes never mixed, and the most rigorous rules of

decency were sternly enforced and adhered to; medical men alone having free access to all parts of the big building. Also, they came in their hundreds from the Faculté de Montpellier, from Paris, and other big places, not from any pious impulse, but to see, examine, discuss among themselves. They laughed a good deal when together, sceptically shrugged their shoulders when called upon to verify a miracle; but were always kind and humane, always ready to alleviate the sufferings of those who appealed to them, when Mary failed.

The piscines were superintended, the sick paupers nursed, the stretchers carried from place to place by so-called 'brancardiers' and 'hospitaliers'—ladies and gentlemen belonging to the highest in the land, who each year formed themselves into a committee and offered voluntary service. They all wore a big red cross sewn on the breast to distinguish them from the crowd, and to enable them to gain free access everywhere.

Towering over grotto and piscines stood the gigantic, hideous basilica. From hence, each day at three, came the procession of the Blessed Sacrament to bring to the dying pilgrims the blessing they could not seek, as it would have been next to impossible to haul some three hundred stretchers up and down the never-ending stone stairs hewn in the mountain side. Amid the clashing of all the church bells in Lourdes and the neighbouring hamlets, the pealing of the organ, the officiating priest appeared in full canonicals holding the monstrance high in front of him. He walked under

a gorgeous silk canopy carried by surpliced clerics, while the 'brancardiers,' shoulder to shoulder, formed a living hedge around him, thus preventing the swaying crowd from carrying him off his feet. Acolytes, choir-boys swinging censers, ran on in front, cutting with tremendous difficulty a narrow path before him. Slowly he moved forward, while to right and left the masses fell on their knees, and like thunder the cry rose to Heaven and rent the air: 'Jesu, fili David, miserere, miserere! Jesu, fili Mariae, eleison, eleison! Guérissez, Seigneur, guérissez nos malades!' On still days the cry could be distinctly heard at Pau and Tarbes, and—some will have—even in Spain. Sobbing aloud, the stricken unfortunates tried to pierce a way close to the passing Redeemer, and were only held back by tender, yet forcible persuasion of kindly 'brancardiers.' One unhappy woman threw herself full length before the celebrant's feet, thus bringing the procession to a standstill while she sobbed aloud: 'Lord, Lord, you shall not pass, but you cure me.' Gently, with words of infinite tenderness and sympathy, two 'brancardiers' lifted her and moved her on one side, while the whole crowd took up her desperate cry, storming Heaven for that sign that came, alas, so rarely!

But come it did, at least once during that particular pilgrimage. We stood waiting for the basilica doors to be thrown open. At my feet lay a stretcher, on it a bandaged form of which I could see but a death's head with staring, glassy eyes. Suddenly the jaw fell open and from it a queer gurgly sound issued:

‘Quick; a priest!’ cried the nun in charge of the moribund. ‘Run, mademoiselle. Mais, courez donc! don’t you see that she is dying?’ As she spoke she gave me a rough push, and sent me tottering into the narrow, densely hemmed-in, open space. I followed her impulse and ran blindly on, falling by good luck into the arms of the Père de Marsac, the Superior of the Incarnation Fathers, whom I had often seen at the Neuilly chapel; but whom I should otherwise easily have recognised from the plentiful descriptions I had received from Mère Clara of him—her principal devotion.

‘Quick, mon Père!’ I cried, tugging at his sleeve. ‘Oh hasten, I implore you, for a dying woman needs your ministration!’

‘Talk not to me of death at the very moment Life Eternal passes in our midst,’ said he, with gruff good humour, obeying, however, my summons with alacrity, as he hastened to the spot, guided by the frequent cries of ‘L’extreme Onction, vite, vite!’

I followed him as quickly as the crowd allowed, arriving just in time to see him bending over the prostrate form.

‘I forbid you to die,’ he said, with feigned bad humour, as he gently wiped the death-drops from the marble brow. ‘At the moment Our Master passes, you rise and follow Him. Dare to disobey.’

She smiled faintly, as he gently lifted her head and wiped her lips with brandy. The nun in charge expostulated: ‘At least give her absolution, mon Père.’

‘I shan’t! She doesn’t need absolution; what

she needs is a cloak to cover her naked legs, that she may show herself to Christ and His servants in decent attire. Bring a cloak, you there !'

They obeyed. Some one divested himself of a long overcoat and held it in readiness to throw over those emaciated shoulders that looked more fitted to wear a shroud. Then the cry of the vast multitudes warned us of His coming.

'On your knees, on your knees, oh, ye of little faith !' shouted the monk kneeling in our midst. We obeyed, and with arms uplifted to Heaven we joined in that mighty cry that rose to the cloudless sky and re-echoed, peal on peal, through the silent mountains : 'Jesu, fili Mariae, miserere, miserere ?'

As the Blessed Sacrament passed just in front of us, the Père de Marsac stood up. The priest's somewhat insignificant figure looked sublime at that moment, as with royal gesture he ordered the moribund to her feet.

'Arise, I adjure thee ! In the name of the Living God, who now passes in our midst, arise and follow Him.'

And she arose—yes, I swear it ! She tottered to her feet. Some one from behind threw the cloak on her shoulders. From the ranks of the 'hospitaliers' on guard round the canopy, two stalwart young men hastened forwards, and taking her between them, placed their hands under her arm-pits and thus, half dragging, half carrying her, they led her inside the 'brancardiers' living hedge, as close to the canopy as a woman is allowed to go. A moment later the swaying crowd hid her

from my sight, while 'Miracle ! miracle !' shouted seventy thousand frenzied voices, and 'Miracle ! miracle !' thundered back the mountain echoes, peal upon peal, from France to Spain, from Mont Perdu to Mont Malladetta, and the whole air seemed to vibrate with the intensity of our emotion.

Was she really cured ?—I cannot say. Had her illness been nine parts the outcome of hysteria ?—I know not. Was the whole performance a little theatrical farce stage-managed by the good Père himself ?—Nay, I'm convinced it was not. If ever truth and sincerity and faith were written on a man's face they were written on his, as he ordered the moribund to follow Christ. He may have deceived himself ; he may have seen a cure where medical men only verified a last flicker of life, but he did not seek to deceive us.

That evening I sat down to dinner with some twenty other ladies who were boarding at the Incarnation during those three days when Lourdes could hardly boast of a single empty bed to be found within five miles of its market-place, the central point of the slummy, if picturesque little village. Beside me sat a charming lady whose sweet voice, quiet manner, and refined face immediately won my heart. She belonged to the committee, she informed me, and held night-watch in the Sainte Rosalie Ward that very night. Would I like to accompany her and assist in her self-imposed task, which was by no means a sinecure ? I eagerly assented. She warned me that the women were rough, ill-bred, rude. They grumbled incessantly, they were grateful for nothing, they

used the most appalling language, and were filthy in their persons and habits. I found she had not exaggerated. Our fifteen patients would have disgraced a party of Hoxton hooligans returning in the last stage of drunkenness from a Bank Holiday trip. They quarrelled, they sulked, they grumbled, they insulted us, they threw cups and mugs at each other, and, I regret to say, also at us. All during that hideous night, Madame la Comtesse d'Harmental never for one moment lost her serene patience, her sweet persuasive manner. Great lady though she was, she rendered to these appalling viragoes the most repulsive services without giving the faintest sign of disgust, although she sent me out of the ward on more than one occasion. Once or twice her low, sweet voice rose in stern rebuke, as she called the refractory pilgrims to order. How could they expect the Blessed Mother of God to obtain their cure from Her Son? How could they ask for her intercession if they did not prepare their souls to receive such heavenly favours? Would they by a night spent swearing, cursing, using the most disgusting language, prepare themselves worthily to kneel before Mary's shrine to-morrow? Let them lie quietly down, offer their bodily pains to God in expiation of their sins, and recite 'Ave Marias' till they fell asleep. Her words gained us a few moments' respite; then the bedlam again broke loose. Not one of these horrors obtained her cure, or even the slightest amelioration of her state—and serve them right!

On the third and last evening of the pilgrimage, one of the nuns called me into the hall to be

introduced to some of Bernadette's descendants. At the foot of the staircase I found three smartly over-dressed kiddies, aged six, eight, and ten respectively—small pupils of the Incarnation who had come to pay their kindly teachers a visit during holiday time. Here I will remark that the Lourdes Incarnation could not boast aristocratic pupils like the Incarnations of Paris, Cannes, Nice and other houses. Their pupils were all daughters of Lourdes tradespeople and hotel-keepers. Thus the father of the three little Soubirous kept the biggest hotel—the Hotel de la Grotte—in the place. He was a grand-nephew of Bernadette's, and his little daughters, in spite of their smart clothes, betrayed their peasant ancestry in every line of their fat, red faces, snub nose, and tiny optics. Taking Clementine, the six-year old one, on my knee, I requested to know whether she rejoiced at being great grand-niece to holy Bernadette.

'Oh, yes,' lisped the mite ingenuously; 'I am so' pleased Bernadette was our great grand-aunt and nobody else's. It is so good for trade, you see!'

'I don't see,' returned I, with bewilderment. 'How good for trade?'

She explained, with a shrewd twinkle in her small pig's eyes: 'It is very good for trade; my papa always says so. The smartest people from Paris, London, and Vienna want rooms at our place when they hear that papa's grandfather was Bernadette's youngest brother. Also, our tariff is higher than that of other hotels.'

I was silenced. This business-like way of

looking at spiritual favours accorded to an ancestress struck me as peculiar, to say the least of it. On that winter day when poor, ragged, barefooted Bernadette went in search of the bits of wood with which to heat the meagre midday's soup, she little realised what a splendid stroke from a purely business point of view she was making for her family.

And thus it is everywhere in Lourdes. The entire population owes its success to an illiterate beggar girl who saw visions in the full sunlight of that wondrous winter day. Oft-times Government seeks to close the grotto and stop the pilgrimages which are not unalloyed blessings to humanity, far from it. But the whole little town rises like one man and dares the authorities to rob it of its daily bread.

I will now say a few words of a pitiable sight I met at the convent and which made a profound impression on me. It was the sight of a 'défroquée,' a miserable shadow of a woman robed in a threadbare, frayed postulant's dress, her closely cropped grey head uncovered. She glided through the establishment like a little grey mouse, always keeping near the walls as if fearful of being noticed and ill-treated, though ill-treatment, at least physical ill-treatment, she had no cause to fear. The Incarnation nuns never raised their hands in anger, they were far too 'Grandes dames' for that sort of thing. She was called 'Sophy' by all; she mended the pupils' and nuns' old clothes; she taught the babes and looked after them in play-time. She was Cinderella, despised and mocked

by all—nuns and children alike. She had a curtained bed in the children's dormitory and took her meals in the school refectory after the children had finished theirs. I learnt her sad story from Madame d'Harmental, who came to Lourdes each year. Sœur Marie Sophie had been a nun. Twenty years ago she arrived at the Incarnation—a bright young girl, offering to the nuns her healthy body and small patrimony. The nuns accepted the money and spent it, while they robed the dear young sister in the purple habit. But behold! after some few years, the money being spent, they discovered that the whole thing was a mistake; Sœur Sophie had no vocation; Jesus had not chosen her from all eternity to be His Bride. It took them seven years to find this out; if only they could have arrived sooner at the conclusion, thereby giving poor Sophie a chance of settling down in the world with her small income—a couple of thousand pounds. But the money was gone, Sophie must go too. At this juncture, some relatives of Sophie's asserted themselves, and darkly hinted at Law Court proceedings if the jilted virgin were returned on their hands minus the dowry. So, making the best of a bad job, the Sacred Council decided to dispatch Sophie to one of their least important houses, where she could be kept cheaply and made generally useful. Now, I have often said that the Incarnation nuns were low-voiced, refined gentlewomen. So they were, at least the greater majority. Yet exceptions could be found here and there. The two biggest exceptions to the general rule I found at Lourdes.

One, Sœur Petra Maria, a big bony, hirsute creature, looked and behaved like a Pomeranian dragoon, and an uncouth one at that; while Sœur Marie Mordecai was the ugliest, most vicious little woman in the arrondissement. These two charming virgins, mistresses of the first class and first division respectively, found their greatest joy in tormenting the luckless, cowardly Sophie. They snubbed her, they taunted her, they humiliated her in front of pupils, lay-sisters, outside people. They forbade her the most innocent recreation, and sought in every way to make her miserable life more miserable still.

Now, Sophie had one vice—oh, such an innocent vice! She loved children's books. Guileless little stories, written for schoolgirls, filled her with delight. Petra and Mordecai discovered this weakness and did all in their power to thwart her. When Mordecai doled out story books to the children, she gave stringent injunctions to prevent Sophie getting at them.

Well, during the pilgrimage, Madame d'Harmental's fourteen year-old daughter left a French translation of the 'Wide, Wide World' lying on the lady-boarder's dining-room table beside a plate of cakes and fruit. Poor Sophie, sliding past the open door after having partaken of her own tepid, flavourless meal in the children's refectory, saw the tempting outlay. She felt so unutterably miserable and forlorn; she had been sitting the whole morning in a hot, airless cell, unpicking the dust-coated hem of a lay-sister's habit. To spend the afternoon hidden in a leafy corner of the big

garden reading that delightful red-bound book and refreshing her parched throat with that tempting, plateful of dainties, oh, surely it would be an afternoon spent in Paradise! Fearfully, she tip-toed inside the dining-room, grabbed plate and book, which she hid under her apron; she flew to the bottom of the garden as if the Erynians were after her, and there, safely ensconced in a leafy dell, she forgot her misery during four blissful hours. Meanwhile, young Noëlie d'Harmental returned at five to find her book and goûter gone, and went in search of both. Meeting Mordecai and Petra in the cloisters, she told them of her loss, on which, filled with unholy joy, the two beldames went in exultant search of their prey. They were already hard on the scent, when Sophie heard them thumping down the alley, and promptly hid the book with empty plate under a heap of swept leaves. She hardly found time to compose herself when the two bore down on her and accused her of the theft. Trembling from head to foot, she denied, when Mordecai's squinting, little, left eye espied the red binding through the brown foliage. She swooped upon it with a squeak of delight. They dragged Sophie back to the convent in triumph, while I watched the scene from an upper window, and it sickened me to see this woman, old enough to be my mother, treated like a reformatory child of ten. In the doorstep she stood piteously sobbing in front of her two brutal judges, who gleefully related her wrongdoings to the superior, who was passing through the hall. She, a charming English nun, the only one in the house who ever had a kind word for wretched

Sophie, now gently remonstrated with the debased creature, telling her to come and ask for fruit or story-book next time she pined for such things, then dismissed the culprit to the dormitories to wash her face. No sooner was the coast clear than I hastened upstairs, to find Sophie sobbing behind her curtains.

‘Oh, hush, Mademoiselle!’ I whispered. ‘Do not give way like that. Tell me all about it.’

Jerkily she gave me a summary of her life-story. It cut me to the heart. She concluded with the information that her only pleasure consisted in hiding away with a story-book. But it was a pleasure she did not enjoy twice in three years. Mesdames Petra and Mordecai saw to that.

‘But,’ I argued in perplexity. ‘What harm can those silly baby-books do you? And how can a woman of your age care to read stories that have been written for kiddies in their teens?’

‘Oh,’ she replied ingenuously, ‘I love to read of the ‘simple vie de famille’; it must be such a lovely life!’

Her words found an echo in my heart and touched me deeply. Suddenly I remembered a five-franc piece that remained over after I had paid our fares.

‘Mademoiselle,’ said I. ‘Yesterday as I passed through the old part of the hamlet, on a visit to the ancient parish church, I saw a second-hand book-shop. There lay outside a heap of torn children’s books marked one and two sous apiece. If I were to purchase for you five-francs’ worth, could you hide them from your two tormentors?’

She beamed at me. ‘There is a dark corner

behind the music shelves. No one ever goes near it. I can hide the books in there, only taking out, one at a time. Oh, Mademoiselle, how good you are !'

'And mind,' I added, 'not to read except when you are sure these two are safe in chapel or community-room. You have lived long enough among them to know something of their daily routine.'

She promised to be careful, and I hastened to the shop. The man, as delighted as Sophie with the bargain, threw in an extra dozen, and volunteered to let the boy carry my heavy parcel up to the convent gates. Nearly all the books were stories written for girls in their teens, and nearly all translations from the English. I smuggled the parcel up to the dormitory, not without fear ; for in the distance I could hear Petra's rumble harshly mingling with Mordecai's squeak. When I saw Sophie's radiant face, I felt that I had employed the money better than if I had spent it in wax tapers for the grotto, and more profitably than if I had knelt hours in the basilica.

Poor miserable Sophie, perhaps she still reads those torn volumes over and over again. It pleases me to think that I was the means of bringing a little sunshine into her wretched existence.

I returned to Neuilly with an idiotic little choir novice, who minced about in her brand new habit, read her Latin breviary with great ostentation and did all in her power to attract the attention of two priests, who travelled in our compartment. She kept nudging me to call her *Ma Mère* and *Madame Eva de la Croix Triomphante* loud enough to be

heard by the other travellers, and was deeply insulted when I gruffly told her—in equivalent French—not to play the silly goat. She never forgave me that ‘silly goat,’ the little viper! and when we again met in the novitiate, managed to get me into hot water with our irascible, if kindly, mistress on every available occasion.

CHAPTER III

BACK in my lady-boarder's room, I managed to get into hot water without outside help of any kind, and that by daring to criticise the eccentricities of Mère Générale's niece, who was staying at the Immaculée with her three-year-old son. This lady, who owned to twenty, may have been about thirty-eight, and everlastingly talked of her husband—a sort of male Mrs. Harris, whom no one had ever yet seen in the flesh. To say she was eccentric in dress, manners, habits would be putting it mildly—she simply acted, spoke, and dressed in a way that would never have occurred to any human being outside Charenton. But her most virulent eccentricities showed themselves in the rearing of her son—a peak-headed, putty-faced, bandy-legged individual, who could neither walk nor speak, who weighed less than an average one-year-old, and was scarcely taller. It was a principle of hers to treat a child from the cradle as a grown-up person. To dress him, feed him, talk to him as if he were a man in the prime of life. Therefore she ordered the lilliputian trousers, silk hat, starched shirt, frock coat and patent-leather boots from an

expensive Rue de Rivoli tailor—not forgetting cane, cigar-case, monocle. To see this pitiful, bandy-legged Tom Thumb dressed like a man of forty, crawling on all-fours, or falling asleep in the most unexpected places, was the most pathetic sight one can well imagine. In this costume, he sat with us at our four daily meals. His head, no bigger than a woman's fist, just showing over the table. Like us, he drank strong tea and coffee, ate eggs and ham, hot dishes and savouries, pastries and cheese at an hour when other children three times his age are fast asleep—and drank his two glasses of port and claret like a lord. This last sight revolted me so, that one day at dinner, no longer able to contain myself, I jumped from my seat, grabbed the glass from the impotent baby paw, upsetting its contents over the starched shirt. 'I will not have it,' I cried; 'if you cannot rear your own baby, pay some sane woman to do your duty.'

Everybody remained dumb at my audacity in speaking thus to Mère Générale's exalted niece.

Madame Nièce recovered first. She raged; she fumed, she stamped her foot. She wanted to rush there and then into the presence of her aunt, who was probably in bed, where the grand-nephew ought to have been, to insist on my immediate expulsion. That I, a nobody, whose name she had not troubled to ascertain, should dare speak in such terms to her, whom nuns and lay-sisters, superiors and postulants treated as a goddess!

Madame Augustin de Sainte Marie, who always presided at the lady-boarder's meal—without

eating herself, of course—managed with difficulty to calm her, after ordering me from the room. During the next few days I remained in dire disgrace, and every professed nun who met me about the house considered it her duty to take me severely to task for my presumption. Some, even, requested me to write a rote of abject apology to Madame de la Tour-Duchâtel; but as I stubbornly refused to comply, they did not press the matter. Then Mère Clara, who came over from the big convent at least once, if not twice a day, to visit me, informed me that the authorities had decided I should leave the lady-boarders' quarters and prepare for my future vocation as member of a teaching Order by giving the lessons of the 'Immaculées' second division, comprising children of ten to twelve. I was to have a curtained cubicle in one of the smaller dormitories, and take my meals at a side-table of the children's refectory. I thought of poor Sophie and tacitly vowed that if similar treatment were meted out to me, I would make the convent too hot to hold me. I am pleased to add, however, that my fears proved groundless. The children obeyed and respected me—many liked me. The nuns showed themselves always kind and amiable, and once—when the refectory sister had served me tepid, insufficient food in a higgledy-piggledy fashion—the *économé*, passing at that moment, soundly rated her, and me, too, for allowing it.

Before continuing my narrative, I would say a few words concerning these relatives of superiors, who honoured us with lengthy, ever-recurring

visits, and lived on the fat of the land at our expense the greater part of their lives. They were the bane and the curse of the whole congregation. Nuns, lay-sisters, children flattered them, bowed down to them in abject adoration. None dared gainsay them, none contradict. They stood above the law, rules and regulations remained dead letters where they were concerned.

We had one such a relative during my few months' apprenticeship at the 'Immaculée'—a Polish girl of nine, the niece or grand-niece of Mère Eugénie de la Tour d'Ivoire. She had been christened Bessy by a Parisian mother—Anglo names, food, fashions, sports, being considered ultra chic in the Paris Smart Set. It is the Anglo-mania Gyp always storms at. Bessy was called Bessie, with the accent on the last syllable, by the French nuns. The creature—who by the way could neither read nor write—was an unmitigated little pest. She had her own suite of apartments, her own servants. She ordered us about as if we were her slaves. She took her meals apart; but when it suited her fancy she joined the other children in their refectory, and sat there enthroned in state, eating daintily served food placed before her on separate dishes, as the ordinary, though good, was hardly good enough for a superior's niece; while the other children were given leave to talk, because Bessie deigned to honour them with her august presence. When she wished to join those of her own age in the baby class, she ruled supreme. She grabbed the other children's toys and broke them without semblance of an apology;

she chose the games—keeping the best part for herself, and made herself an intolerable nuisance, while the silly nuns hovered round to see that she did not hurt or overheat herself, praising her pretty face, her smart sayings, her dainty clothes, and holding her up as an Admirable Crichton to the rest of the class, who stood sulky and surly around.

One day I, who was usually employed teaching the older children, received orders to go and replace Madame Berchmans de l'Enfant Jésus at the baby class for half-an-hour. After she had settled me at her own cathedra, she turned to her twenty-five darling tots with gentle words of admonition.

'I hope you will be good children and not give Mademoiselle Miriam unnecessary trouble.' Then turning to me she added in lower tones: 'If they are naughty, don't punish them, or speak harshly. I don't believe in drastic treatment for very young children. Just remind them that the troublesome ones won't be allowed to play with Bessie, or lend her their toys.'

I nodded my acquiescence. I had grown wiser since the day I bearded Madame Nièce under her aunt's roof. Barely did the door close behind the class-mistress than one little puss laid down her pen and started to improve the shining hours by tickling the neighbour's neck with one of her own flowing ringlets. In the delinquent I recognised one Laure de Commène, a charming little Greek girl of eight, who was far prettier and more advanced in her studies than Mademoiselle Bessie, and quite as well, if not better born, being a lineal descendant of the celebrated Alexander Commenius. I shook

my head at her, admiring the while the sweet little face with its large, limpid, violet eyes, and pure Grecian profile.

‘Now, my little Laure,’ I gently coaxed, ‘take up your pen and be industrious, else you will not be allowed to play with Bessie.’

She made a droll face as she answered in her pretty, defective French. ‘Eh bien, la belle affaire ! Je m’en moque pas mal, moi, de votre illustre Bessie !’

The comical way in which she imitated the French nun’s pronunciation of the Polish girl’s name sent the whole class into fits of laughter, in which I joined in spite of myself ; while the children’s expression told me—that one and all they hated Miss Bessie, and heartily wished her back in Cracovie.

Also during the year I spent at the big convent—myself a pupil—we were honoured by the prolonged visit of one, Mademoiselle Gigit, Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent’s five-year-old niece. She proved worse, if anything, than Bessie. As the big girls were all some ten or twelve years her senior, they naturally suffered less than Bessie’s baby-victims. The ‘Grandes’ worshipped the pretty, fairylike little creature. They carried her about, petted her, loaded her with expensive toys, fed her with choice dainties, making her sick five days out of the seven. The ‘Enfants de Marie’ and Mère Magdalena’s chief favourites were alone found worthy to touch her, while the others adored and made their offerings from a respectful distance. One day a Spanish girl, who wore the Aspirant’s ribbon,

said to me in an undertone, 'When the baby King visits us at the Madrid convent, we do not fuss over him to that absurd extent, nor would his mother and tutors allow him to behave as abominably as does that detestable Gigit.'

At that juncture, I caught sight of Lili Fentraux, that sneaky child of Mary before-mentioned, and the best detective in the place, standing close behind us with bent head in a listening attitude. I trod on Dolores' toe; but too late. Her incautious words had been overheard and got reported. She never obtained the child of Mary ribbon, although she proved herself a model pupil; and left us six months later, still an Aspirant.

One 'jour de sortie' which had been lengthened into three in honour of a visit from a new Papal Nunzio, Gigit—I regret to say—still honoured our convent. Nearly all the pupils, taking advantage of the three days, had gone home, only five English girls and myself remaining behind. As they all wore ribbons, we were left unpoliced. During the afternoon, Sœur Marie Ersilia, Mère Magdalena's special attendant, approached us leading Gigit by the hand. Without noticing the girls' lowering looks, she accosted them with beaming countenance.

'You will rejoice to hear,' she cooed, 'that Mademoiselle Gigit is pleased to spend a few hours with you. Do not let her fall into the pond, be careful she doesn't overheat herself, don't give her any more rout cakes; they disagreed with her last time'

She would have probably continued an endless

list of don'ts,' when an Aspirant, more plain-spoken than courteous, broke out in Anglo-French. 'Oh, take the little animal away, ma Sœur! We don't want her prying about, just when we are cosy and at peace.'

The sister's look of pained surprise was comical to behold. Casting a venomous look at the bold speaker, she turned away without a word, taking with her the obnoxious Gigit, who cried over her shoulder.

'I'll tell my aunt, Nelly, that you called me a little animal; then you won't get your blue ribbon.'

Nelly did *not* get her blue ribbon, she—like Dolores—left us with the narrow purple one still adorning her shoulders, and the cold, distant way with which the nuns, especially Mère Magdalena, treated those five British outsiders, during the next few months, made me feel sorry for them, and grateful that Sœur Ersilia had not caught sight of me, lying on the grass reading behind the spreading oak-trees.

My life was a busy one during that winter. I taught in the class-rooms eight hours out of the twenty-four. During the remainder of the day, I studied the new religion I intended to embrace. Three times a week I went to the big convent, where, in a room adjoining the sacristy, and called the priest's parlour, I received religious instruction from the Père de Montfort, a guileless smooth-faced monk of the Incarnation, who may have been about thirty, and who, when I drove him desperate with my endless arguing, wearily responded, 'Believe, my child, and close your eyes. Holy

Mother Church understands, if you don't. Let that suffice.'

Mère Clara always assisted at these instructions. It would not have been considered 'convenable' to leave a girl of twenty alone with a man of thirty, even though he wore religious garb. By the end of Lent they decided between them, that if only I could vanquish my detestable habit of always seeking to teach my betters, I might, with time, become a fairly decent member of Holy Church. So trusting to the sacraments for the cure of my dominant vice, they named a day for my abjuration, conditional Baptism, and First Communion. They would robe me in white and perform grand ceremonials around my insignificant, unattractive personality. But here I rebelled. I liked ceremonies well enough, when I could watch them, myself hidden away in the gallery; but to form the central point of one—no thank you! After doing battle for three weeks they gave way, and I triumphed.

One evening, when all the nuns were in the refectory and the children in the recreation-room, I stood in the darkened chapel, and abjured heresy, afterwards receiving conditional Baptism from the hands of the Père de Montfort, and in the presence of Mère Clara, Mère Waltruda, and a couple of sacristans. The next day, being a day of general communion, I slipped in among the other pupils to receive the Bread of Life.

After Mass I quietly returned to my duties. Some of the principal nuns, who knew of my conversion, congratulated me, but the bulk of the

convent indwellers knew nothing of my private affairs. Indeed, so silent, so unnoticed had I passed in their midst for nearly two years, that few even knew me for a Protestant. A couple of days later I was received a child of Mary in the presence of Mère Clara, and the president. I bound myself to recite the Office of the Virgin each day, and I hung the blessed medal the priest gave me on my watch chain, but steadfastly refused to wear the broad, blue ribbon, on the plea that I was no longer a child.

Some weeks later, during a bitterly cold spring, I got laid up with a very sharp attack of pleurisy. For six weeks I found myself relegated to one of the smaller rooms pertaining to the infirmaries, alone with my books and my thoughts. When at last I could rise the doctor ordered me off to the country, as it took me some months to recuperate.

So next day I went to Andecy, a charming little village some twelve miles outside the fortifications. It was the first time I visited an Incarnation holiday-house. The nuns possessed several, and very spacious, luxurious ones they were. At Andecy I found a seventeenth-century mansion, surrounded by two hundred acres of well-laid-out gardens, orchards, meadows, and woods. Extensive stables filled with plump cattle occupied the rear. The property had belonged to a family of the 'Vieille Noblesse,' whose last descendant, the Marquis d'Uxcelle, had fallen on evil days. The pious nuns, very wide-awake and very much on earth when it came to making a good bargain, had obtained the entire estate at a ridiculous price. At the time

of my visit the place was in splendid working order, and they pocketing immense profits.

I only found five in the Community—Mère Gonzalès de la Crèche—the permanent superior, Sœur Marie de la Voie Douloureuse, a professed choir nun, Sœur Blandène des Anges, a professed choir novice, and three healthy lay-sisters, who helped the other servants on the farm. Nuns from other houses were continually coming and going, mostly for week-ends.

Mère Gonzalès, although past seventy, spent her life in the stables, working (and also talking) like a ploughboy. For Mysticism, ecstasies, supernatural life she cared not a jot. She cared solely for her cattle, which she loved as the tenderest mother loves her offspring. Her twelve horses, her thirty cows, her fifteen pigs, her geese, and her poultry claimed all her attention, and left her barely time to hear Mass with half an ear. I never knew her to perform any other devotion. She knew all her pets by name, she talked to them as we talk to babies, she often sat up at night to nurse the sick ones.

At Mass, which was celebrated in a large room transformed into a temporary chapel, she placed her prie-dieu close to the window, from whence she enjoyed an uninterrupted view of the stables. At the 'Ite, Missa est' she sprang up, as if a tarantula had bitten her, and scampered off to where her heart already dwelt. A moment later we heard her asking Fleurette how she had slept, scolding Blanchette for not giving more milk, counting the eggs and praising the hens who had

done best, kissing the nose of each little pig, and generally attending to the wants of her four-footed darlings with as much assiduity as a good mother shows in attending to her family.

The professed choir-nun, Madame Marie de la Voie Douloureuse was, I learnt a little later, afflicted with religious mania in its most acute form. I watched her do the most hare-brained things, but was, as yet, myself too young and inexperienced to guess the sad truth until told of it.

Of-times she escaped to the village, and, going from cottage to cottage, informed the bewildered peasantry that they beheld in her another Francis of Assisi, and would they kindly duck her in the pond, pursue her with pitchforks and generally help her to win a martyr's crown. The honest village folk having no desire to spend a night at the police-station courteously declined; but willingly filled her basket with the broken victuals she asked for, then watched her mincing down the street praying aloud, while they tapped their own foreheads with significant winks at one another.

Inside the house her conduct proved no less erratic than in the street. At the dead of night she jumped from her bed, ran in her white night-garment from room to room; pulling us out of our warm beds and urging us to prepare for the Coming of the Lord. When we took to locking our doors, she remained in the passage reciting the Lamentations of Jeremiah in an unearthly voice, which sent cold shivers down my back.

At one time we had the workmen in the house for nearly a fortnight. Madame Marie de la Voie

Douloureuse pursued these hapless young fellows at their work and at their meals. She poured Holy-water in their soup and their coffee, thereby rendering both beverages quite unpalatable. She plastered pictures of saints on their bread and dripping. She dropped medals down their necks when they were enjoying their midday snooze; she sewed scapulars in their caps and coats, and finally drove the poor lads well-nigh frenzied. In despair they sent their employer to complain to the superior, but she was too busy with her four-footed children to trouble. Little recked she what took place in convent and village, so long as she found herself at peace in her stables. But one day she caught the Incarnation Assisi preaching to the pigs and washing the goat's tail with Lourdes' water. Gonzalès took the poor saint by both shoulders and sent her spinning on to the dunghill, with the warning never again to enter the stables, as the sight of her vagaries might upset the more delicate cattle. That we, the villagers, the workmen, were upset and frightened, troubled this excellent lady not at all.

It was from the third nun, Sœur Blandine des Anges—a sickly little Italian novice, who a few months later got dismissed from the Order on account of ill-health, a luxury only granted to the more important members of the Community—that I learnt about poor Douloureuse's sad state, and after that I felt too sorry for her ever to laugh or make fun of her again.

Fifteen years previously she entered the convent a bright, intelligent, healthy girl, gifted with an

exceptionally well-trained contralto voice. From the first she determined to become a great saint, to imitate Francis and Dominique, Claire and Gertrude, Mechtilde and Térése. Hot-blooded, impulsive, hysterical, visions came at her bidding and finally turned her brain. The nuns kept her as long as her glorious contralto voice was of service in the choir. When I first met her, it already showed unmistakable signs of cracking, for during fifteen years she had used it unsparingly in the service of the Order. A few months after I left Andecy, I heard that the Chapter had begged from the Vatican the annulment of her permanent vows, which they obtained without the slightest difficulty, much less difficulty than we worldlings have in obtaining a decree nisi, which proved that these solemn, much-talked-of vows are not so solemn after all—and turned the poor visionary out neck and crop. The old mother expostulated at the wrong done her by the Order, who robbed her of a fair young daughter, healthy and exceptionally gifted, to return a useless, mad woman. But the family was penniless, law-court proceedings are expensive, so, as is usual in such cases, the wealthy Incarnation triumphed.

The first of May, which I spent at Andecy, I thoroughly enjoyed, as indeed I enjoyed all first of Mays spent in the convent. This particular day seems to be dedicated, at least in France, to the patron saint of anarchists, whoever that gentleman may be. On this day our somewhat explosive gentry is always expected to distinguish itself in quite an effective way. Blow up the 'Chambres,'

throw a bomb at the President, or something equally conclusive.

But the anarchists' principal 'raison d'être' consisted in obtaining a martyr's crown for all monks and nuns, so at least the latter opined. Each first of May, therefore, we spent in hysterical excitement; we prayed to Mary and the Sacred Heart to save unhappy France; we made processions, novenas, triduums and Ways of the Cross without number, only to wake up on the morning of the second, to discover that the anarchists had completely ignored our existence. On several of these occasions, some rascally little college lad—mostly the brother of one of our pupils—sent letters of warning, written in a disguised hand, telling us to prepare for death. At such times, the excitement waxed frantic, and, prostrate in chapel, we waited for a death that did not come.

Some Andecy wag warned Mère Gonzalès that the anarchists had nefarious designs in her stables, sending the poor old lady nearly as insane as Marie Douleureuse. She insisted on bringing nearly the entire stock into the house for that one night. For weeks after the place smelt abominably, and we were infested with fleas; yet I and little Blandine managed to extract a fair amount of fun from the situation.

One little anarchistic story, related by Mère Clara, and of which she always showed herself inordinately proud, deserves to be mentioned here.

Mère Clara being Superior of the Sedan Incarnation that year, the first of May was spent, as usual, 'in articula extremis.' The day passed also as

usual, in monotonous calm. At nine o'clock, the hour at which Mère Clara sought her virginal couch, she happened to gaze out on the moonlit grounds, where she espied—oh, horror!—a mysterious-looking white parcel lying threateningly under her very window. A bomb! What else could it be? Gasping with fear she hastened into the corridor of the cells to rouse the sisters. Immediately they surrounded her, arrayed in long, white flannel garments adorned with purple crosses sewn on their breasts, their shaved heads covered with tight-fitting nightcaps of antiquated form. They looked for all the world like superannuated Crusaders, metamorphosed by some particularly malignant mediæval wizard into early Victorian spinster aunts. She told them the fateful news, ending with the admonition:

‘Let us be brave, sisters! Let us go forth to meet death with prayers on our lips, not let it find us sleeping. Sœur Marie Dosothée shall precede us with the big crucifix, while we follow in procession, chanting the “Miserere.”’

So they sallied forth in their ‘deshabillé,’ nor did they perceive, seated on the wall, some half-a-dozen grinning urchins, for though the moonlight shone as bright as day they possessed eyes only for the bomb. When they reached it, Mère Clara decided that it must be rendered harmless by being thrown into the pond; but none coming forward to offer herself as holocaust for the welfare of the Community, the superior ordered the youngest lay-sister—a stalwart, stolid Flemish lass—in the name of Holy ‘Obedience,’ to cast Satan’s tool into

the deep. The girl, unable to talk French and hardly comprehending what all the fuss was about, obeyed with wooden countenance. Then all returned to bed chanting the 'Te Deum' with exultant, if hoarse voices.

The next day, the gardener—on hearing of the nocturnal procession—immediately smelt a rat, and determined to go to the bottom of the affair. Easily he fished the parcel out of the shallow little water. It contained an old boot filled with grated cheese rinds. But then, as Mère Clara said, each time she repeated her oft-told story to a delighted audience, it might have contained dynamite, and it showed plenty of courage on their part to take the bull by the horns. It certainly did show courage to sally forth on a chilly night in early spring, covered only with a night-gown, and under the eyes of grinning street youths. True, the good nuns ignored the fact that their procession had been witnessed, until a local paper informed them that all Sedan rocked with laughter at their expense.

During my wanderings through Andecy and neighbourhood, I made a very good friend in the person of the curé, a dear old boy of seventy, with the face of a rosy crab-apple and the heart of a little child. He loved his garden and his bees, as Mère Gonzalès loved her cattle, and I spent many a pleasant evening wandering amid the well-tended flower-beds, eating home-made bread thickly spread with honey, discussing European politics with my jolly old host, who, when he laughed, as he did all the time, shook the tiny hamlet to its very foundation.

He never came to the convent. I learnt from Blandine that he and Gonzalès had quarrelled about the sale of a pig. My informant also added that she, as well as the whole village, knew how Mère Gonzalès was alone to blame in the affair. However, it was quite as it should be. It is an established rule in all French villages that curé and bonnes sœurs nourish a feud, which, carefully nurtured, has been handed down from generation to generation, since the days of the 'bon Roi Dagobert.' This feud is the one chief topic of interest to the neighbourhood. Nobody knows, the belligerents least of all, what the quarrel is really about; but it gives food for gossip, and pleases all parties.

When I asked my good old curé how so sweet-tempered a man as he managed to come to loggerheads with our superior he went into roars of laughter.

'Ah, les femmes, les femmes!' he stuttered. 'Why does one quarrel with them? Mais parce qu'elles sont femmes, pardieu! and the devout virgins are more "femmes" than the rest.'

PART III
AS A NOVICE

CHAPTER I

IN the beginning of July they recalled me to Neuilly to receive the postulant's cap and enter on my religious life. Filled more with curiosity than fervour, I regret to say, I hastened to the mother house and at the next solemn Chapter, which took place each Sunday after High Mass in the stately parlour—closed for two hours against the naughty, much despised worldlings—I asked for admission to the Order. At this Chapter the chairs were placed in four long rows, two on each side and facing each other. At the head in front of the big fireplace, stood Mère Générale's throne. The house being heated with hot-air pipes, fires were little known in the establishment. At eleven, the Community took their seats, each member according to her rank. The Générale then entered in state, made a discourse we mostly already knew by heart, and then listened to our 'coulpes.' The sisters came up the centre two at a time, knelt in front of her, confessed their venial sins, were reprimanded, received a penance, and withdrew after humbly kissing the ground. The lay-sisters all left the hall when they had finished, the novices—who came next—did likewise, as it was not

deemed prudent to find fault with the big-wigs in presence of the smaller fry.

At the very beginning of the proceedings candidates asked humbly to be admitted as postulants, postulants asked for the holy habit, novices to be allowed to make their temporary vows, and professed novices to pronounce their final ones. Seated close to the door, the postulating candidates, dressed exactly like the pupils, except that their dresses touched the ground, with their hair tightly braided round their heads, came forward the moment Mère Générale was seated. They knelt down and in a monotonous tone—all speaking together—prayed to be admitted to this holy Congregation, all unworthy as they knew themselves to be. After saying a few words appropriate to the occasion, words which never varied, the Générale rose and placed a little white frilled bonnet on each bowed head—the choir dame's cap being a little smarter and more up to date than that of her humbler serving-sister. Having tied this fantastic headgear under each chin, Notre Mère imprinted a kiss on each forehead; then the new postulants walked down the front row to receive the kiss of peace, and finally to disappear by the door, as they did not assist at Chapter till after their robing.

Thus I also made my début, and what struck me most was the childish, puerile importance given to each phase of religious life. For all the world it reminded me of children playing at grown-ups.

And now, before continuing my narrative, I will say a few words of the novices' premises and the novices' day.

The novitiate consisted of three airy, well-lighted apartments. The smallest was the novice mistress's sanctum, comfortably yet plainly fitted up with writing-desk, bookcases, and bureaux. Into this much dreaded room each novice went separately and at stated periods to be reprimanded, encouraged, directed. The favoured ones liked these visits and sought to multiply them. The non-favoured mortals looked upon our mistress's apartment as a chamber of torture.

The second room, termed 'Novitiate de Notre Dame du Rosaire,' by reason of the Lady's altar that adorned it, was a vast room with five windows, fitted up with desks that ran all round the walls and accommodated forty novices, who sat with their backs to the centre. The assistant's desk stood close to the door leading into the mistress's room. The biggest of the three rooms had seven large windows and was fitted up with thirty desks. In this immense apartment we had our recreations, our assemblies, novice chapters, and lessons, at which Notre Maîtresse sat at the top of the room in a cathedra raised high above us, and we sat on small benches placed in front of the desk and lining the whole room.

We rose at five—that is, the newcomers were expected to keep the rule very stringently. The older members allowed themselves a good deal of laxity as well in the hour of rising as in their food. But at five-thirty sharp, while the big Convent bell tolled the Angelus, followed by a hundred strokes, lay-sisters, postulants, novices, hastened to the choir, many of them still busy with their

wearing apparel. Those who arrived after the hundredth peal prostrated themselves in the middle of the choir until the oldest member present gave them the signal to rise. Till a quarter-past six we remained in silent prayer, or rather we made our orisons, a head-breaking process composed of preludes 1, 2; points 1, 2, 3; finals, ejaculatory prayers, resolutions, and spiritual bouquet. That safely accomplished, we recited Primes in choir, during which the lazy professed nuns, who had already reached the pinnacle of sanctity, came struggling in—mostly yawning and still dressing themselves. During the martyrology sung on two notes by three novices standing at the lectern, the children were marched to the gallery, and for all the poor mites tiptoed, they received perpetual admonition not to make so much noise—as if eighty healthy children can enter an apartment like so many disembodied spirits.

At half-past six we heard Mass, at which most of the big-wigs made their first appearance. Nearly all the professed nuns communicated daily, novices and lay-sisters four or five times a week, the children of Mary twice if not oftener, and the remainder of the school on Sundays and feast-days. After Mass the priest exposed the Consecrated Host in its golden Monstranz, for we Incarnationists prided ourselves on having 'Perpetual Adoration,' a privilege few Orders can attain, as flowers and wax tapers are rather costly. At eight we novices went to the novitiate, recited a lengthy string of prayers in front of the altar of Our Lady and presided over by our mistress. This prayer we

termed the offering of actions. We then hastened to the larger novitiate called 'Novitiate des Anges,' for 'Obedience,' which lasted some three minutes. We ranged ourselves in two long rows on each side of the cathedra, where our mistress sat in state, and asked permissions: 'May I have soap?'—'May I have candles, needles, pencils?'—'May I write a letter?' went in dreary repetition down the rows, relieved only by Mère Agnès's equally monotonous 'Oui, ma Sœur.'

At eight o'clock a bell rang to usher in the 'Petit Silence,' i.e. to proclaim that we must talk but for the most necessary things. After that we hastened to tidy our cells, thence to the refectory where lay-sisters and novices enjoyed the most delicious café-au-lait and crusty roll. To this fare the professed added a pat of creamy butter, while those who sat above the salt, who one and all enjoyed delicate health, revelled in some dainty savoury, smoking under covered dishes.

During the morning we had two lessons—at eight and at ten-thirty. The first we received from our mistress, it comprised theology, philosophy, the study of Saint Thomas d'Aquin, and Saint Augustine's works. In reality she only taught us what any boy of sixteen, who is preparing for Holy Orders, already knows. But we were all—mistress and novices alike—inordinately proud of these lectures. We quoted Augustine, Origen, Tertullian, sometimes even in halting dog's Latin, at which performance we simply burst with pride. We were like children in our babyish vanity. We spent our lives trying to impress a world who utterly

ignored us, how immeasurably above seculars we stood in learning, piety, and mysticism. We continually reminded each other of those poor, silly, brainless 'gens du monde' who dressed and danced, ate and rioted, while we filled every moment of our lives with prayer, study, and grand austerities. We patted ourselves and each other on the back, so to say, crying out to those beyond the pale: 'Look at us whom God chose, elected from all eternity, ye poor worldlings rushing headlong down to hell.' And all the time the worldlings hastened past our grey walls bent on pleasure, duty, business, without giving us a thought. And amidst those crowds how many thousand holy, unselfish mothers, wives, daughters who were truly saints, who suffered daily, hourly, with smiling faces? Women immeasurably our superiors, who in Heaven will be lifted high above us—yet we knew it not, poor self-satisfied fools, nor they either.

At half-past ten came the lesson 'des Petites Règles' held by the assistant. They may well have been called 'petite' for they were petty, puerile, ridiculous to an incredible degree. Here are a few, by which the lucidity of the remainder may be measured: 'When kneeling pull up your habit'—'Don't wipe your basin with your dirty linen'—'Kiss your sleeve when you arrive late in choir through no fault of your own'—'Say such a prayer when putting on your wimple, your apron, your veil'—'Every quarter of an hour replace yourself in the presence of God by such an ejaculation'—and so on, through some two hundred pages. Yet we had to copy them, learn them by

heart and, what is more to the point, observe them—a head-breaking process. At eleven-thirty we recited Terce, Sext, Nones in choir, then examined our little consciences in stern silence. At twelve the gong called us to the refectory, also a hall of stately dimensions, the walls painted with a never-ending procession of all the martyred and consecrated Virgins who have been canonised by the Vatican. Two narrow tables ran down each side of the apartment, leaving a big space between them. The nuns sat on one side of these tables, which were only three feet in breadth, the inner side being untenanted. Before each place lay the white napkin adorned with earthenware basin, knife, and wooden fork, which we had to wash ourselves, after each repast, in a drop of cold water. Washing never is a conventual strong point. In front of each place the refectorians put small deep dishes, containing our portions: meat, vegetables, pudding, dessert—all excellent, abundant, savoury. The food was better and more varied than in the children's refectory, although there also it was above comment; the wine of a better vintage, and the 'abundance,' a concoction of wine and water, very much stronger. At the top of the table, where the great mystics sat, the 'petits plats' were more numerous and more savoury, while they dwindled away to nothing at the far end of the long line. During the meal, while we listened to the edifying story of that day's saint, fed from common earthenware on choice bits, and drank excellent Bordeaux from a pudding-basin, we took turns in performing our penances. They were

ludicrous and of infinite variety. To see an elderly young lady kneeling in the middle of the refectory placarded with a big square of cardboard bearing in Gothic letters the ominous word 'greedy,' 'peevish,' 'dissipated,' 'naughty,' 'fretful' was nearly enough to make the most dyspeptic cat laugh. There were other penances equally diverting. The penitent walked round the refectory on her knees, begging for a piece of bread. Each sister demurely and with downcast eyes supplied her with a crumb, which she took in triumph to her seat and ate as accessory to her own ample portion. Another, also going the circuit on the inner side of the tables, humbly kissed each sister's foot. Sometimes a too impetuous virgin pushed her tootsie forward with such vigour as to hit the luckless penitent on the nose, and send her rolling into the centre of the hall, very often upsetting another penitent, who was dining on her knees, into her soup. But this sort of thing was quite inadvertent, and happened but rarely, I rejoice to say, for the suppressed sobs of agonised laughter issuing from the lower regions where sat the unregenerate novice and postulant, was painful to hear, and might easily have ended in the rupture of an important blood-vessel.

After dinner we went in procession to the choir reciting the Miserere. Then we novices hastened to the novitiate, took our mending baskets, and, seated round our adored mistress, listened in awed silence to her we worshipped as a divinity. At half-past one and again at seven, we went to the Community room for the 'Obedience,' which lasted a few minutes, and during which the nuns asked

permission to obtain from 'economat' or dispensary any little thing they might need. In theory the nun, after making a vow of poverty, may possess nothing. All the things she uses—clothes, books, knife, fork, pens, &c., are ostentatiously marked 'A l'usage de Sœur X——,' meaning that she may make use of these, yet not consider them her property, but the property of all. In practice, however, should it happen, as it often did, that one sister bagged some rubbish devoted to another's use, a scene ensued in all respects similar to those we witness in our nurseries amongst the smaller fry. At 'Obedience' also a few sisters made their 'coulpes.' 'Coulpes' could be made at various ceremonies, but especially at Chapter. The prescribed formula ran thus: 'Ma Mère, and mes sœurs, I humbly make my "coulpes" of having broken a cup—or of having spoken without necessity during little silence—or of having laughed during big silence—quarrelled with a sister—spoken harshly to a pupil,' and so on *ad infinitum*. Then the presiding Superior said a few hackneyed words suitable to the occasion, and the culprit, having received her penance, which consisted in mumbling some short prayer, kissed the ground and rose absolved. These solemn proceedings accomplished amid universal silence, we all knelt for the Superior's blessing, then scattered to our various duties.

After 'Obedience' we made our 'spiritual lecture' walking up and down cloisters, woods or garden, for thirty minutes. It was the time of the day I most enjoyed. At two, our mistress held solemn, thrice-solemn novitiate, during which

we again made our 'coulpes'—more lengthy than at the 'Obedience,' and were hotly rated, much more hotly than we had been upstairs. After which our mistress expounded the constitutions and, in flowery, exalted, exaggerated language held forth to her spell-bound audience on the beauty, the privilege, the greatness of religious life. With cutting contempt she spoke of those miserable creatures who marry and bear children—who live and love in that great Babylon called 'le Monde.' With eyes uplifted to Heaven she thanked God, who had chosen His brides from among millions, and, exalting them high above all other creatures, loaded them with celestial favours. The absurdly childish conceit that ran through all her discourses oft-times filled my heart with doubt and dismay, as I looked round the novitiate at myself and my sixty-nine companions. I could not hide from myself that we—one and all—more especially those who were deemed the most saintly, brought in with us from that much despised world, our petty conceits, our childish vanities, our jealousies, our sensualities, our ill-tempers—yea, brought them and kept them—ever growing, through ten—thirty—fifty years of religious life. True we wore a monastic habit of æsthetic beauty. True we recited—even in Latin—the Roman breviary. We communicated nearly each day—we bore fantastic names; and yet—and yet we quarrelled, we sulked, we went into tempers like children, we said nasty things of each other, we delighted in getting each other into disgrace, we fell violently in love with this or that nun and

spent our day trying to attract her attention—a sort of conventual flirtation. In one word—though we never broke one of the Ten Commandments in a bald, coarse way, we lived the lives of little schoolgirls—and naughty little schoolgirls at that. Thus we remained silly, troublesome children from the day we took the cap, when still—for the most part—in our teens, till the day our hair grew white and our shoulders bent in old age. Like Peter Pan, we never grew up. It was our boast to remain all our life as babes in the hands of our superior—who in her turn remained a child under the guidance of general, confessor, or director. Perhaps I dwell too much on this subject: the spiritual conceit of the woman who, believing herself to be singled out from the crowd, separates herself from the world, dons a fantastic habit, bears a still more fantastic name, and proclaims herself the bride of Heaven, while all the time she remains a silly, fussy old maid—incapable of big crimes as of heroic virtues, retaining all the petty faults of the secular,—who in most cases far surpasses her in unselfishness, interior mortification, love of God, true humility—this is the keynote of the entire religious life, such as I saw it. Of prisoners chained starving, naked, bleeding in damp airless cells, of novices or refractory professed walled-up alive, of new-born babes buried in hidden places I saw nothing. Other conventual writers revel in such descriptions; well, possibly they may have witnessed these horrors in other convents, though I doubt it. But they would never have seen anything of the kind at the Incarnation, where every

nun was a virgin in very truth—if a foolish one—and where the humblest lay-sister, the poorest out-door servant, aye, even the domestic animals, were kindly and humanely treated. I want to show that if it is ridiculous to accuse these kindly, harmless old maids of unmentionable vices, it is equally ridiculous for them to imagine themselves created as a kind of medium between God and man—as beings whose prayers, mortifications, and virtues are to obtain the salvation of sinners from a Bridegroom who can refuse His bride nothing. This, however, was the purport of our mistress's daily instructions.

'Ye are the salt of the earth,' she hysterically sobbed. 'Aye, and ye are the apostles of the Apostles themselves, for by your austerities and macerations, your prayers and virtues alone can they hope to obtain success in the arduous task of saving souls. But for ye, millions would fall into hell each day. Ye—even ye—are the holocausts to be offered daily on the altar of Divine Love for the sins of mankind.'

Thus she bellowed on, hot and perspiring, while in front of her, ranged on low benches, sat seventy smirking little fools, hugging themselves. At first I thought her fiery, ardent language very exalted; the flowery similes, the poetical allusions, the mystical phrases, touched me not a little, for was I not young myself in those days? But when I learnt that all the novitiates, chapters, instructions held by novice mistresses, general and local superiors, were plagiarisms taken from fathers of the Church, noted Jesuits, celebrated preachers,

and repeated year in year out without a variation from the day of the foundation in 1839 till the present day, my enthusiasm received a damper.

The supper, 'obedience,' evening recreation, were a repetition of the noon-day exercises. At eight we recited Matins, again examined our consciences, and then retired to bed—first passing, on cold nights, through the kitchens to fetch our hot-water bottles. Though the house was well warmed from garret to cellar, we all needed these bottles, and during the cold winter days all the more important professed rested their consecrated tootsies on a dainty brass box filled with red cinders. From October to May, Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent never made her appearance, but some five or six professed nuns in their thirties and forties trotted behind her, squabbling with one another over her 'chauffrette,' as the brass cinder-box was called—each one wanted to be the honoured, much-envied carrier. Sometimes in their zeal they upset the box and burnt their habits, to the undying joy of such of the pupils who managed to catch a glimpse of this delightful scene.

In our cells we divested ourselves of our garments, with many a mumbled prayer. The first night, I washed, according to a lifelong habit; but was heard by my neighbour—a professed novice. Indeed, it was the Lili of my school days, who after being the best-behaved and sneakiest child of Mary, now distinguished herself as the best tittle-tattle and spy of the novitiate. The professed novices are to the novitiate what the Enfants de Marie are to the school—spies, whose principal duty

consists in watching the new members, and reporting their sayings and doings to the novice mistress. So the next day Mère Agnès de l'Agneau Imolé soundly rated me, and forbade me any more post-prandial ablutions. So unwashed, but with white souls, we all sought our straw pallet. In theory, every nun slept on straw. In practice, I do not think that there existed one pallet in every hundred but was covered with an excellent woollen mattress—and a hair one for the big-wigs.

CHAPTER II

AND now to return to the particular year of my novitiate. Having received the cap and been dubbed Sœur Miriam du Sacré Cœur, I, feeling very shy and uncomfortable at finding myself the only postulant at that ceremony, bolted out of the Chapter room when I reached the door, thankful that a solemnity, in which my own insignificant five-foot-one figured as centrepiece, was safely concluded.

I wandered to the Chapel, not quite knowing what next might be expected of me. After a time a professed novice, one Sœur Adèle du Zèle Ardent, whom I knew by sight, aroused me from my reveries and bade me follow her. On reaching the novitiate, she took me in a corner, told me that each postulant was awarded an angel chosen from the ranks of the professed. To this angel, the candidate for heavenly favours must appeal in moments of uncertainty. The angel's duty consisted in teaching her charge the million and one petty rules, to see she observed them, to warn her when she committed a fault—to help, fortify, console her in distress or doubt.

Mère Agnès de l'Agneau Immolé, our novice

mistress, thus handed me over to Adèle du Zèle Ardent, who had just pronounced her temporary vows. Delighted with her newly-acquired dignity, she showered on poor me as many warnings, admonitions, lectures, as would have sufficed every postulant male and female to be found that day in Holy Mother Church.

During one of my first recreations, I found myself seated near my old friend Jacqueline d'Herblay, to whom I had not spoken since she bade me farewell after the distribution of prizes. Recognising her under her new woollen veil, for like Adèle she had just pronounced her temporary vows, I recalled to mind that Madame Bien-Aimée des Neuf Chœurs, for love of whom she renounced Satan, the world, and the world's pomps, had left Neuilly some time ago for a distant branch house. Curiously I peeped at my neighbour. Did she regret the donation of herself to God, now the sole incentive thereto had been removed? After an interchange of friendly greetings, I ventured to reconnoitre, by saying that I had seen nothing of Madame Bien-Aimée for some months.

'Madame Bien-Aimée! What Bien-Aimée?' queried Jacqueline (there were several who went by that name in the Congregation). 'Oh, you mean dear little Bien-Aimée des Neuf Chœurs. Why yes, she went to Genoa more than a year ago.. I wonder if she is still there?'

The indifferent, aye, contemptuous way in which she uttered that very name she could not pronounce two years ago without growing rosy red, filled me with amazement.

‘But you loved her two years ago—you could not live without her. Don’t you remember?’ I queried, somewhat indiscreetly, it must be owned.

She laughed merrily. ‘Did I really? What a goose I must have been! Bien-Aimée wasn’t a bad little thing, yet I can hardly believe that she sufficed to fill my heart. Well! I know better now.’

She raised her eyes ecstatically. They were filled with so much adoring love, that involuntarily I followed their gaze, and inwardly rejoicing, believed that at last I understood. The much-talked-of ‘toquades’ were but childish pastimes. Once initiated into the mysteries of supernatural life, the nun threw all childish affections aside with her worldly garment, and opened her heart to Christ alone. But Jacqueline’s (I have forgotten her religious name) gaze did not, as I hoped and expected, rise as high as the crucifix suspended above the cathedra, and from which the Man of Sorrows bent His head with so sad—and at that moment, it seemed to me, so whimsical—a look on His seventy rollicking little brides, who arrogated to themselves the greater part of that boundless love He sheds on all mankind, while they remind Him ten thousand times a day of the immense sacrifice they had accomplished in giving up all to follow Him. Nay! Jacqueline’s gaze remained fixed on the occupant of the cathedra, who with the most exaggerated gesticulations was just then holding forth to a spell-bound audience.

My religious exaltation fell below freezing-point, as it so often did in those days. ‘It is Mère Agnès

de l'Agneau Immolé you now love ? ' I queried, a world of ineffable disgust in my voice which—luckily for me—escaped her.

' Who else could it be ? And don't call her Mère Agnès de l'Agneau Immolé, say Notre Maîtresse, as we all do. Love her ? Why I worship her—she is divine, adorable ! We all adore her ! Don't you ? '

I answered vaguely. I could not say just yet. Having entered the novitiate but eight days ago, I knew little of its inmates. Nor had Notre Maîtresse spoken to me during that time.

Jacqueline gave my humble little cap a contemptuous glance. Notre Maîtresse had scant time to trouble about postulants. We had our angel to look after us. Then she went on rhapsodising about her beloved one ; but I did not listen.

With absorbing interest I gazed at the individual in the cathedra of whom, as yet, I have said but little, for all she possessed the most interesting personality to be found in the whole Order.

Mère Agnès de l'Agneau Immolé, aged forty-eight at the time I made her acquaintance, was a native of Charlesville, and unlike most of the head nuns, brought neither a great name or big dowry, by means of which nearly all the others had risen to pre-eminence in the Order. Mère Agnès' intelligence, her talents, her absorbing individuality, her sparkling vivacity and superabundant energy, alone raised her to the most important office of novice-mistress at the death of Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé, who had occupied that position since the foundation of the ' Incarnation.' Of her physical

appearance, I can say but little, ~~her~~ principal feature being a pair of huge blue goggle spectacles that covered nearly her entire physiognomy. Her eyes I never saw. Not five members in the whole Congregation could boast ever having seen them, for she placed her spectacles on her nose each morning before rising, and discarded them last thing at night. But really, there was no need to see her eyes, generally termed the mirror of the soul. *Her* soul was portrayed in the spectacles. Those two bits of blue glass wept and laughed, sorrowed and rejoiced, gleamed in raging anger, gazed in loving sympathy, then again in silent contempt, with as much and more intensity than the most expressive human eyes. Indeed they seemed human—those two bits of blue glass. They were famous throughout the Order. ‘*Les lunettes de Mère Agnès*’ once seen, can never be forgotten. Sisters going into distant houses never to return, might forget their mistress’s somewhat insignificant features, her spectacles they never forgot. Nor have I forgotten them after all these years. Mère Agnès was a woman of a thousand moods, and those thousand moods portrayed themselves ten thousand times a day in those two uncanny bits of blue glass. Mère Agnès had her faults, as who has not? The most trivial incident sent her into raging fits of passion that swept the novitiate like a roaring hurricane, to subside as quickly and as suddenly as they had risen. She never nursed her anger, she never bore malice, she never remembered an injury done her. Hers was the hand always first held out to forgive and to ask,

forgiveness, and if her exalted position forbade her to humble herself before her subordinates, the blue spectacles looked so tenderly out on the world after each tempest, that all who saw, could read : ' I failed—forgive.'

Mère Agnès was a mass of childish conceit. Everlastingly she talked of herself, her soul, her desires. Yet ! how could it have been otherwise ? She entered the Congregation at the age of fifteen, never to leave it again. The child she was on entering the sacred portals she remained throughout, and surely her conceit may be deemed very pardonable, very natural, when one remembers that she lived raised high above an adoring throng to whom her word was infallible, her very look a gift from Heaven, her slightest nod of approval ardently sought for by all. Mère Agnès was greatly given to favouritism, her likes and dislikes were as ardent and as fiery as the rest of her individuality. Such as she was, none came near her but loved her, and not without good cause, for with all her faults she was a most lovable woman. There was a charm, a fascination, about her that the most stolid could not escape.

From the contemplation of my new mistress, I turned to her assistant, the young lady whose neck required but a monthly wash. Sœur Teresa du Sacrament d'Amour was a pert little miss of twenty-six summers, who sought to imitate her superior officer in a way that was screamingly funny, and in which she ignominiously failed ; for Mère Agnès with all her faults, had a big generous heart and a great noble soul, while Teresa ever

remained a pigmy. Yet Sœur Teresa had pronounced her final vows, she was chief favourite among many favourites. To Mère Agnès' great love for her, she owed her present exalted position, and woe betide the luckless postulant or cotton novice who failed to do her homage. Many worshipped her as much as they worshipped Mère Agnès, for—as it is in all communities—the higher a member rises, the more satellites and sycophants surround her to form her court.

One last word of Mademoiselle Jacqueline, who has already figured so largely in these pages. A few months after our conversation related above, she received her marching orders, and was dispatched to Nîmes, from whence—as far as I know—she never returned. From the moment she learnt her fate from our mistress's lips, she sobbed night and day in the most heartrending fashion, but this time I knew no compassion, feeling convinced that before the waning of the moon, her fickle heart would be caught at the rebound. My unspoken prognostications proved true, as I learnt from a sister who arrived from Nîmes some six weeks later. Jacqueline loved the superior of that house as she had never loved before, and would never love again. In this, Jacqueline in no wise differed from her surroundings. All nuns and pupils alike fell in and out of love with stupendous ease and rapidity. I often conjectured how it would have been with some of these women, if, remaining in the world and marrying, they had not learnt to bridle their wayward affections. Surely they would have spent the greater part of their lives in the

divorce court. Luckily for the nuns, however, mystical unions are not dissolved by divorce courts, and as joky old Waltruda often said, with that caustic wit of hers, perhaps it was better to change one's 'toquade' as often as circumstances allowed. The more numerous and ephemeral the passion, the less dangerous the wound. The only 'toquade' at whose shrine Mère Waltruda had ever been known to worship was her own witty self, and in that, methinks, she proved her remarkable good sense.

My time of postulat ended after three short months. I then took the veil in company of eight others, five choir- and three lay-sisters, and very thankful was I to find myself lost among the crowd. It was ever thus at the Incarnation. Unimportant members, who belonged to no particular family, bore no high-sounding name, brought no immense dowry, were herded together for the clothing and the vows. The lay-sisters and those choir nuns who were nobodies waited for each other, until they numbered about six to twelve, when one scamped ceremony did for the lot.

But it was a very different thing, when the scion of a noble house or the daughter of a millionaire gave herself to Jesus, especially when her money-bags enabled her to wear gorgeous bridal attire. Then the ceremony took place with resplendent pomp, and for her alone. The Smart Set filled the strangers' chapel, chattering and eating bonbons, laughing, criticising, staring round with their eye-glasses, as if they were on the Auteuil race-course, instead of the convent chapel. Yet we

tolerated their indecorous behaviour in the hope that they might put their hands into their pockets, which they invariably did in lordly style. The President des Enfants de Marie carried the bag round on every possible occasion. I have known the collection to amount to some twenty or thirty pounds on ordinary Sundays; on grand occasions it rose to five times that sum.

I will tell of a 'prise d'habit' that took place a few months after my own, as being one of the most sumptuous affairs of its kind I had the pleasure of witnessing. One Sœur Isabelle, the natural daughter of a Royal duke, was casting aside for ever the trappings of this gay and naughty world; very probably because the bar sinister prevented her from occupying the position that, under luckier circumstances, might have been hers. We nuns overlooked this little accident of birth—enough for us that we possessed a live Royal duke's daughter in our midst. So the choir prepared its most beautiful music—the altar its most gaudy aspect. The Cardinal accepted the office of celebrant, and a velvet prie-dieu was placed in front of the strangers' chapel to accommodate the Duchess of Montpensier, who often honoured our house to be received with Royal homage, for though we considered ourselves miles above all wretched seculars, we could toady very humbly to the great and mighty of this world. Behind Her Grace, 'tout Paris,' robed in the most extravagant 'dernier cri' laughed and flirted, talked scandal and ate of Marquis' five shillings per lb. best, while waiting for the curtain to rise.

To the swelling strains of one of the best organs in Paris it did rise slowly, and through it, came the procession of white-mantled nuns bearing torches. Each one sought her stall, while the bride, robed in heavy brocade and sparkling with diamonds, moved slowly up the centre, surrounded by her bridesmaids, six charming tots in white lace frocks with natural flowers in their pretty hair. The bride knelt on a prie-dieu, placed in front of the altar, the little maids, after arranging her train, grouped themselves behind her. Then the sacristy door opened, and the Cardinal appeared, surrounded by his assistant priests, acolytes and choir-boys, foremost among them one Maurice, son of our head gardener, a four-year-old dumpling who, in his new chorister's gown, looked as important as if he himself had just been elevated to the Papal See. The ceremony began with a short exhortation, delivered by one of the assistant priests, while His Eminence sat in a stately armchair facing the Duchess. If he looked at the pretty ladies opposite more often than might have been deemed in keeping with his sacred character, it was, no doubt, that he deplored the levity of his fair diocesans and prayed ardently for their conversion. The preacher served up the same hackneyed flowers of speech we swallowed year in year out on similar occasions. He extolled religious life, he vaunted the heroic virtues of Jesus' brides in contrast with the vice of worldly brides, much to the detriment of the latter. But as the 'dames du monde' never even made a feint of listening, their feelings were mercifully spared. The sermon over, to the relief of all, the mistress of

novices and her assistant approached the bride and drew back her veil. Then the Cardinal, aided by the other priests, cut her hair, mumbling all the while Latin prayers. Meantimes, she threw all her jewellery into the lace basket which the senior chorister presented to her. Being shorn of her woman's glory, which in this case—being the size of a youthful rat's tail—did not represent a very heroic sacrifice, she was divested of her veil, orange blossom, and other finery. She then rose, and, followed by her maids and sponsors, left the chapel. During the interval the organ played the Wedding March, the Cardinal slept, the choir-boys made faces at each other, and the naughty little ladies whispered 'risqué' comments behind their gloved hands, and thanked the Lord that they were not in the shoes of that particular bride.

The interval, shorter than it seemed, came to an end, amid general rejoicing. In some houses—Spanish ones, I am told—the disrobing of the worldly bride and the robing of the Heavenly one, takes place in the very centre of the choir. But such naïve customs are hardly acceptable in more sophisticated Paris. To see a young lady stand unblushing in stays, short petticoats and stockings, in the presence of Cardinal, priests, and sundry frock-coated gentlemen would tax—too severely, I fear—the gravity and decorous behaviour of pupils and choir-boys, to say nothing of the visitors, whose behaviour left much to be desired, even without that severe test.

The curtain rose the second time, and in the place of the resplendent bride there entered a

humble little novice, arrayed in purple habit and white veil, but minus the accessories. She again knelt in front of the Cardinal, who blessed her clothes piecemeal; blessed the accessories handed to him by the little maids, who then handed them to the mistress of novices, with which the latter invested her new child. At the very last, Monseigneur placed the crown of white roses on her virginal brow, and while the choir sang 'Veni, Sponsa Christi, Veni accipe coronam,' the newly-made bride went from stall to stall, torch in hand, to receive the kiss of peace. The ceremony concluded, we hastened to the novitiate to finish the day chatting and gobbling the expensive sweets, with which the naughty, but warm-hearted, seculars never failed to supply us. My robing was identical in all its main points; but neither Cardinal, duchesses, or 'tout Paris' deranged themselves for such small fry. The altar trappings and musical parts of the entertainment were less elaborate, and alas! no goodies were forthcoming at the ensuing recreation.

On the evening of her 'prise d'habit' the new bride received from our novice-mistress the various instruments of torture with which to macerate her delicate body. These instruments, however, were more for show than use, and there were only two in all. The first article comprised a small whip made of a few thin strings, knotted at regular intervals, which once a week we administered to the lower part of the back, just at the place where the spine terminates. We performed this act discreetly hidden in our own darkened cells. Most

of us laid on so lightly as not to dislodge a fly, while we scrambled through the Miserere. Nothing more comical, more exhilarating, than to stand in the corridor of the cells, on Friday evening, and listen to each sister gingerly and tenderly chastising her own vile body, while she romped through the Miserere in less time than it takes a devout priest to pronounce the *Ite, missa est*.

The second article, still more rarely used than the discipline, was a tiny bracelet containing a few blunt spikes bent inward, which we wore round our arm for an hour at a time, in such a way as to enter the spikes into our flesh. When we discarded this ghastly instrument of torture, the little red marks it left behind would not have made a three-year-old cry, and disappeared before we had pulled down our sleeves.

I also heard of hair-shirts, but never saw them. They are obsolete, it seems, and I doubt whether the entire community has worn out one among its sisterhood during the seventy-three years of its existence. The younger ones among us had not acquired the degree of sanctity requisite for such an heroic austerity. The older ones—having reached the top of the mountain—no longer needed to mortify their flesh; such mortification being but a means to an end.

We abstained on Fridays and days of obligation; that is we contented ourselves with excellent fish dinners and egg suppers. We fasted five or six times a year: that is, the very small minority who had not obtained dispensation fasted. Nor were these rare fasts very terrible either. A cup of

strong coffee and slice of bread at eight; fish, savoury, sweets at twelve and again at five, does not sound so very formidable. Many a poor workman's family whose breadwinner is out of work would thank God on bended knee for such a day's provisioning. For the rest, our mortifications consisted in performing the ridiculous little penances already mentioned, in saying our 'coulpes,' and being reprimanded in public, and in making as many acts of interior mortification as the spirit led us to make. For that purpose, we wore, pinned to our side, a tiny virtue register, composed of movable beads. At each heroic action which our Guardian Angel alone witnessed, we pulled a bead up, at each sinful one, a bead went down. At the next direction, we rendered account to our mistress. Oh, note the delicious simplicity of the children of God!

CHAPTER III

BUT I have talked long enough of such ghastly themes as penances, disciplines, iron chains, and fasts. Let us now turn to the more pleasing narrative of the many recreations and festivities that intermingled freely with our austere and saintly life. Few—very few married women of the upper middle classes enjoy as many red-letter days as we ‘holocausts for the sins of the world’ did. Of the working classes I speak not at all. To them—poor things—pleasure is but an empty word to be found in the dictionary; it has no part in their lives. It had a very important one in ours, for we not only enjoyed some twenty big fête-days a year; but had half-holidays on minor occasions too numerous to chronicle—the principal ones being clothings, professions, end of retreat days, visits of local superiors coming from branch houses, return of Mère Générale from her many ‘voyages d’agrément.’

Christmas followed shortly on my clothing. Of the religious ceremonies I will say nothing, as I described them fully in Part I, and they never varied from one year to another. But no sooner had the last Christmas chimes died away than we prepared to make merry in honour of the feast of

the Holy Innocents. Now, it might appear to the reader more appropriate to keep this day as a schoolfeast, for children under sixteen are, or ought to be, more innocent than young ladies ranging from nineteen to thirty. But the 'Powers' thought otherwise, so while our pupils, down to the tiniest tot at the Immaculée sat or knelt in solemn silence in schoolroom or chapel, we celestial brides romped with great glee. It was usual on this day to elect an abbess from our midst who ruled supreme for sixteen hours, amid much jesting and laughter. The election took place on the eve of Holy Innocents, but—like all things at the Incarnation—proved mere form and show. Sœur Teresa broadly hinted at the candidate Mère Agnès wished to elect, so we obediently voted for that one; the elected abbess being nearly always a professed novice—and always, without fail, a prime favourite with Agnès and Teresa. That year the choice fell on one Sœur Marthe de l'Enfant Jésus, a fat, jovial tomboy of three-and-twenty, as also the best mimic in the Order, who made an excellent, if somewhat boisterous, Madame l'Abbess. After eating, drinking and making merry all day we returned to silence and higher mysticism at Matins' first bell.

On the first of January rules and regulations were again laid aside, and immediately after Mass we ushered in the day with a sumptuous breakfast. During the morning, divided into camps, we played a somewhat rowdy game of hide-and-seek, in which most of the younger Great Professed * joined us. I

* Those who had made perpetual vows, and left the Novitiate.

now comprehended why, two years ago, such strict injunctions had been given to the pupils not to leave their own quarters. Their saintly instructors most certainly did not present a very edifying appearance, as they sprawled, dishevelled, shouting with laughter, all over the place, not seldom squabbling about trifles that would not have ruffled the temper of a three-year-old in this iniquitous Babylon the poor secular worms inhabit.

At dinner we seated ourselves to an eight-course meal, washed down by three different kinds of wine. As I ate my portion of roast duck stuffed with chestnuts, I glanced up at the ivy-framed turret window, from which Aggie's pert little face peeped down two years ago. To-day the window remained closed, the Wolfertons were keeping Christmas in their happy Surrey home, and as I pictured to myself the indulgent parents surrounded by their rosy-cheeked girls and boys, a wave of bitter longing filled my heart. Ah, for such a simple English home life! I bowed my head to hide the now gathering tears; but luckily my emotion passed unheeded amid the terrific hullabaloo made by over two hundred carousing virgins. We finished up the day with theatricals, copiously washed down with refreshments. That night doors opened and closed. The witching hours of night were kept alive with groans and moans, while novice and professe, postulant and superior, sought the infirmaries in search of relief. I, one of the very few who never suffered from indigestion, laughed to myself as I sent a last whispered greeting across the Channel to that pretty Surrey home,

‘Aye, Aggie, little Aggie, this is your revenge for the boiled beef and carrots.’

On the 21st of January we again romped and rioted in honour of Saint Agnes, our adored mistress’ patron saint. An enormous table, placed for that one day in the centre of the novitiate, groaned under the weight of innumerable costly presents. Several weeks beforehand Sœur Teresa, aided by some of the more important professed,* collected the moneys and decided the presents. She also approached me on the subject, requesting me to write home for a substantial money-order, never doubting but it would arrive by return of post, running into two if not three figures. In the simplicity of their childlike hearts, French nuns firmly believe that all London business men who go up to their city offices each morning by train are multi-millionaires, who light their cigars with banknotes and risk a cool ten thousand on the turf each racing day. I, being less guileless, obeyed, yet with misgivings. Humbly, I entreated my mother to send me five shillings for the superior’s birthday. The answer, a hasty scrawl, reached me within twenty-four hours. Sœur Teresa, as she handed me the open letter, looked me up and down with such contempt, disgust, repulsion, that I still shiver at the very memory. I needed not to read my mother’s short note. I knew it beforehand. She requested to be left in peace. She curtly and not unreasonably remarked that one hundred a year seemed to her ample for the needs of a mystical

* In this case *professed* stands for professed novice of two years’ vows, who, if at Neuilly, made part of the Novitiate:

young lady who had renounced the flesh, the devil, and the pomps of this world, to lead a life of austerity and mortification.

For the next few days I remained under the ban of the novitiate, and those who know what that means may indeed pity me. Sœur Teresa forebore to answer when I addressed her, which by the way I did but rarely, while the other novices pulled their habits aside when I approached them, for fear of contamination, and even Mère Agnès made biting allusions to those wretched London merchant princes whose money-bags are dragging them down to hell, and who do not even seek salvation by politely making birthday presents to Jesus' chaste spouses. She spoke thus during an evening recreation, while nearly seventy pairs of eyes glared contemptuously at my shrinking, abased self. Meanwhile, my reprobate old dad, looking very little like a merchant prince, or any other kind of prince for the matter of that, jogged serenely on his way from Cleveland Square to the Stock Exchange in search of those money-bags which would have to be a deal heavier before they succeeded in dragging his twelve stone very far downward.

On the feast of the Epiphany, we joyfully devoured the Three Kings cake, and the favoured winner of the bean, proudly took her place at Mère Générale's table.

In some religious houses, so I heard, a charmingly infantile Epiphany ceremony takes place, which, to my loss, I never witnessed. All the portable male statues the house contains are placed in a

circle on the Community table. While the nuns join hands and dance round and round, singing innocent glees, the superior cuts the cake ; then, with bandaged eyes, places a slice in front of each statue. These preparatory ceremonies accomplished with great solemnity, the superior searches for the bean, and the statue in front of which it is found is proclaimed king amid hysterical rejoicing and clapping of hands. Sometimes even the electors tumble into each other's arms in their exuberance of innocent delight. It would make one suppose that in case the bean having fallen to another statue's share, wailing and sobs might have filled the edifice for the whole octave. I am pleased to add, however, that such is never the case. Whether the bean falls to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint Joseph, Saint Roch, the Infant of Prague or Saint Aloysia, the rejoicings are the same. The winning statue is then placed in the centre of the table, the rejected ones being ignominiously bundled back on to their pedestals by waiting lay-sisters, while the choir nuns renew their dancing and singing. Dishevelled, tired and breathless, the revellers then adjourn to the refectory, with the superior holding a plate, on which the reunited pieces of cake are placed, in their midst. Blindfolded she again distributes the slices—to the nuns this time. The second winner is proclaimed queen consort and bride of the first, and allowed to place her bridegroom's statue in her cell for the whole of the octave. Such are the innocent pastimes of God's favoured spouses. Surely it is hardly worth while entering a cloister

for this sort of thing, which could be just as well carried out in our nurseries.

The evening of *Mi-Carême* was marked by minor jollifications. We arranged some theatricals on the spur of the moment, to which we invited the big community, but the performance proved a failure, causing scandal and dissension among us, for to the disgust of several professed nuns, some twelve of the fattest, most comical-looking, ugliest novices, dressed up in a most ludicrous fashion to represent characters from the Old Testament. Thus two angels looking like tipsy Apaches (one being fat, jolly, rollicking *Marthe de l'Enfant Jésus*; the other no less a person than the author of this work) sat on overturned baskets, awaiting Abraham, their sluggard host, who could be seen inside his tent in shirt sleeves and braces, waxing a very up-to-date Kaiser's moustache; while Sarah, looking like an apoplectic jelly-fish, stood rocking with laughter behind a door. After that, Balaam came to loggerheads with his donkey, Noah gave a sort of Henley entertainment to his floating establishment, and snoring Jacob watched the most comical figures of cherubs and seraphs tumbling up and down our convent gardener's big ladder. But long before we reached this climax, English, Scotch and a few Swiss nuns had departed to their cells in high dudgeon. Thus the devil of strife entered in our midst, as he did, alas! but too often. We dubbed our adverse critics, iconoclasts, calvinists, heretics. They retorted, by calling us scoffers of Holy Writ, but though we quarrelled oft-times, I must here

add, in justice to the entire Order, that none ever allowed the sun to go down on her anger. A quaint, charming custom prevailed among us. Each evening at the conclusion of 'Obedience,' sisters who had had words during the past twenty-four hours sought one another in the crowd, and both kneeling, both talking together, each blaming herself, exonerating the other, asked one another's forgiveness, then deposited a chaste kiss on the vis-à-vis cheek, simultaneously kissed the ground, nearly always bumping their two heads in the process. Thus the vast Community room presented a comical sight to the uninitiated, each evening after seven. The waxed floor was literally strewn with little kneeling figures, jabbering excitedly into one another's faces. After the explanation, the smacking kiss of peace, followed by the floor kissing, culminating in the head bumping, which, if not actually in the programme, was also most exhilarating, and filled the profane onlooker with unholy joy.

To return to our festivities, there were many more, all similar in that we romped, acted, ate, and drank. But while we choir-sisters enjoyed innumerable red-letter days, the humble little lay-sisters had but one. On the feast of Saint Martha, their patron saint, we novices did the housework, or pretended to do it, while the good little creatures in their anxiety to spare the grand lady nuns, worked doubly hard on the preceding day, so that when we donned the blue apron after Mass, amid much chatter and laughter, we found nothing to do, especially as it was holiday-time and the school empty, but to trip about the place and enjoy

ourselves, while the lay-sisters sat in the garden round their mistress, and, what they rarely did, rested.

In the evening we gave them a free entertainment. Sœur Marthe de l'Enfant Jésus, our chief buffoon, donned their habit, and strutting up and down a raised platform, took off each one, showing her little peculiarities, mannerisms, and way of walking, while the sister, easily recognising herself in the parody, joined in the good-natured laughter at her own expense. The mimicry of the oldest sister proved the success of the evening and elicited roars of delighted laughter. But this sister deserves a few words all to herself, for she was an institution in the establishment, and beloved by all.

Sœur Marie Pierre, or Papa Pierrot, as we all called her, had first seen the light of day in a Belge hovel in the second year of the last century. As a girl of thirteen she stood on a distant height and watched our British red-coats forming an iron wall against the advancing enemy. She heard the crash of Blücher's dragoons as they came thundering down the Marsac Road. She saw the valiant Guard—'La garde qui meurt, mais ne se rend pas'—fall to a man, and stain her native country with the blood of heroes. She beheld that gigantic little man, awe-inspiring even in defeat, desperately, but vainly seek for death on that disastrous field, where all his hopes, his ambitions, his greatness, lay buried for ever and for evermore.

Papa Pierrot's uncles, father, brothers, fought on Europe's greatest battlefield—or, to be more

correct, they ran away with the rest of their cowardly little countrymen ere the first cannon was fired. Pierrot therefore belonged to a family of soldiers. She loved the species, and when in 1870, the daintier, more gently nurtured nuns fled in terror before the rough hordes billeted on them, the stout-hearted septuagenarian remained behind to guard the place, nurse the wounded, and generally drill her boys. She loved them, and taught them to love her, to respect and obey her. No swearing, no naughty words in Papa Pierrot's presence. She kept stern order among her youngsters, from whom she received the nickname that clung to her till death.

One storyette about her boys she often related with great gusto. The greasier their midday soup, the better they enjoyed it. It had to be literally covered with little yellow blobs—termed 'yeux' in French, to please their fastidious taste, and they even clamoured for 'plus d'yeux, plus d'yeux,' not 'bon vieux Papa Pierrot!' The dear old soul did her best to gratify them. But one day, it being the eve of a great feast, she decided that they must observe the abstinence ordained by Mother Church for the good of their souls; so she sent in a meagre soup, and waited to hear the indignant cry with which it would be received. To her surprise, dead silence reigned in the refectory, only broken by a queer shuffling sound she could not account for. Puzzled, she peeped through the door, and stood gazing in bewilderment at the strange scene before her. The boys were walking slowly and in single file round the room, each one

with his hands resting on the shoulders of the one in front of him, and pushing his plate of soup along with his feet.

‘Now, mauvais sujets,’ indignantly demanded the old lady, as soon as she found her tongue. ‘Why do you spill your good soup all over my clean floor, instead of eating it?’

‘The good soup is blind. It has no “yeux,” Papa Pierrot. That is why we are obliged to lead it,’ answered the delighted rogues with a grin.

But if Papa Pierrot could scold her boys, she could also love them. Many a poor delirious lad lay his aching head on her motherly breast to be soothed to sleep by her sweet words. Many a one—during the last dread agony—forgot that hundreds of miles separated him from his humble cottage home, and believed that he saw his mother’s face bent so lovingly over him, and felt her soft, cool hand on his fevered brow.

When I first made Papa Pierrot’s acquaintance, she was fast approaching her centenary. A round tub of a woman, five feet high, alert and active, all her faculties unimpaired. Though no duties were allotted to her, she bustled about the tiny ‘salle des bains’ the greater part of the day, fondly imagining that she cleansed it, being strengthened in her delusion by many a kindly little lay-novice, who stealthily crept behind her, doing the work, while leaving her the merit. ‘Papa’ certainly contented herself with nothing less than perfection, and woe betide the luckless wight who spilt a drop of water on her immaculate floor. Also, she regarded the choir novices as her pet foes,

complaining that they everlastingly washed their feet, messing her spotless 'salle des bains.' Now I do not think that such a charge could be rightly brought against us. I blush to think how rarely many of our number performed this necessary ablution. But then we numbered seventy odd, and under our cotton veils we must all have looked pretty much alike to old Pierre. Again and again she sought out our mistress, a countrywoman of hers, and one she had known in short frocks.

'Ah, Sœur Agnès, Sœur Agnès,' she wailed into the younger woman's sympathetic ears, 'what is wrong with those little novices of yours, that they must be ever washing their feet? Cannot they find the way to Heaven without all this unnecessary waste of soap and water? In my young days we thought less of our toes and more of souls; but this new-fangled education is just ruining the present-day youth. Look at Mère Waltruda, a saint after the good God's own heart—and yet, never—never have I known her wash her feet.'

It was in just one such a phase that Sœur Marthe de l'Enfant Jésus took off the dear old woman, and she did it with such consummate perfection that the whole hall rocked with laughter, the nonagenarian's senile cackle rising shrilly above the din. But I do not think we were laughing so much at her, as at the allusion to Mère Waltruda's feet, which must have been in a nice state if Pierre spoke true, and they had not seen soap and water during the forty years of that mystic wag's religious career. She, who so often delighted in being funny at her neighbour's expense, now sat

in our midst smiling on the wrong side of her mouth, and finding out at last how pleasant it feels to be held up to public ridicule.

So much for the pleasures and pastimes of consecrated virgins who have renounced Satan, the world, and the world's pomp, to follow Christ. Taken all in all, I do not think that the sacrifice was such a terrible one in practice, as it appeared in theory, and I recall to mind one tot of seven who was evidently of my opinion. One day, as she sat in the junior schoolroom sighing over a three-figure addition sum that would not come right, she gazed surreptitiously out of the window, to behold some fifty novices romping 'inter liliās.' Carried away by her inner feelings she heaved a very audible sigh, as she unconsciously thought aloud: 'Oh, how dearly should I like to be a holy nun !'

'Would you really ?' queried the 'surveillante' in surprise. 'And do you quite realise what it means to give up all the pleasures and false delights of this naughty world, to lead a life of mortification, penance, and austerity ?'

'But what is a life of mortification, penance, and austerity ?' ingenuously queried the mite, as she lifted ~~two~~ solemn blue eyes to the teacher's face. 'Does austerity mean playing hare-and-hounds, while other people do three-figure addition sums that come out different each time they try again ? If so, I will certainly lead a life of austerity when I grow up.'

CHAPTER IV

ON the days that we did not celebrate holidays, 'Double Majeure,' 'Majeure,' and 'Mineure,' we still enjoyed each day two recreations of several hours' duration. During those hours we chatted, or rather we listened to our adored mistress, who loved the sound of her own voice and the sickening, fawning adulation we bestowed on her. The favoured ones kept up the ball of conversation, while those who knew themselves unpopular wisely held their tongues. I was of that number. Notre Maîtresse did not particularly care for me, nor can I greatly blame her. I was neither pretty, nor brilliant, nor lovable, being too shy to show affection. When I did raise my voice, which happened but rarely, it was usually to contradict and argue, the ruling passion strong in death. Try as I would I could not correct myself of this, my dominant vice.

One day, Mère Agnès, who hated the English, said something disparaging of the then Prince of Wales, the late Edward VII. Now it was a foregone habit of the Parisian of the second half of the nineteenth century to paint that Royal gentleman as black as, and blacker than, the devil. Well, if *he* didn't mind, and I am perfectly convinced he did

not, there really was no reason why I should. So I shrugged my shoulders with an inaudible 'bah' and like a wise virgin went on with my darning. But in an evil moment our sainted mistress threw aspersions on his wife's fair fame; then, like a fool, I fired up. 'You lie,' I cried; 'you lie. You know—all Europe knows—that no purer, no truer woman than our Alexandra ever graced a Royal court.' I stopped at last, becoming aware of the dead, uncanny silence that surrounded me. It lasted several seconds. Then Mère Agnès, trembling and speechless with rage, pointed to the door. I departed, and for the next few days remained a thing apart, shunned by all, Maranatha Anathema among the elect. I was neither starved, ill-treated, nor beaten. I was simply ignored; till at last, Sœur Teresa acridly demanded to know when I intended to seek forgiveness. As soon as she bade me, I humbly returned; so at the following novitiate I went on my knees and humbly sought a pardon I knew myself unworthy to obtain. Mère Agnès' fury had long since subsided. Kindly and gently she assured me that she had forgiven, that she regretted having wounded my national feelings, that I did right in standing up for my country and Royal House, but that I must be careful never again to allow myself to be carried away by my passions. Touched by her forbearance, I followed her to her private room, and again kneeling, repeated my apologies. She bent and kissed my forehead with the gentle words: 'C'est bien, c'est bien; ma petite Miriam. We both failed. We both must forgive and forget.'

Who could help loving her? There was an irresistible charm about that woman that made one forget her little foibles and vanities, to note only the beauty of her big soul and generous, noble heart. She showed favouritism. The whole novitiate was ruled by it. So impulsive, so impetuous a woman could hardly fail in having strong likes and dislikes, and in betraying them. Each one of us knew how we stood in her affections, and how our neighbours stood. Her favourites always received the most coveted offices and remained at Neuilly as professed novices—a most enviable position—while those she did not fancy swept corridors, occupied the last places in choir, refectory and Chapter, and were packed off to a local house the moment their novitiate had expired, oft-times without pronouncing the temporary vows, which ceremony was performed at the smaller house. But even to those she did not favour she could be kind and loving on occasions. Aye! it often seemed to me that she tried her hardest to show sympathy and love to those who were most anti-pathetic to her.

Among her prime favourites were two sisters, who had been pupils of the Incarnation since babyhood. They were charming girls—pretty, talented, intelligent. Both possessed good soprano voices, both painted, played several instruments, and arranged theatricals to perfection. In these theatricals, in which we indulged several times a year, they always took leading parts, for they were accomplished actresses. A few months after they had both pronounced their temporary vows their

widowed mother took the postulant's cap : thus the whole family found itself united in the Sanctuary, leaving outside in the cold, bleak world one son, a lad in his teens, who, finding himself bereft of home and womankind, fell into bad company and finally came to grief. The three distressed women lifted their hands on high and bombarded Heaven with novenas, triduum, rosaries, Ways of the Cross, and other devotions too numerous to state, in the forlorn hope of bringing this wandering sheep to the fold. It never occurred to them—to the mother in particular—that their duty lay clearly marked before them ; namely to give up all this ridiculous mum-mery termed '*la vie surnaturelle*' and return to natural life, where they could look after the boy more practically than by wearying Heaven with endless mumbled prayers.

Another prime favourite of my novitiate year was a poor young girl of twenty, crippled from baby-hood, who could only move about on crutches, and lay all day on a luxurious couch placed on the right side of *Mère Agnès'* cathedra in the Novitiate des Anges. So useless a member could hardly have hoped to gain admission into the Order, but that she bore a great, a very great name, and brought a big dowry to the convent. Possibly she gave herself to God, poor little thing, knowing that the world, in spite of her birth and fortune, could give her but little brightness. Indeed I fear it is the case of ninety nuns out of every hundred, who, like myself, say good-bye to a world who cannot, or will not, give them their heart's desire.

Mère Agnès loved this little Antoinette de la

Croix—we all did—for she was a bright, merry little thing, always smiling and cheerful in spite of bodily pain and sleepless nights. We all prayed and hoped that she might be cured, although the best specialists had long since pronounced her incurable. But what science cannot do, the blessed Virgin can, of that we all felt assured. So one day, leaving her charges to the tender mercies of Sœur Teresa, who enjoyed her temporal superiorship a great deal more than did her luckless subjects, Mère Agnès carried her ewe lamb off to the distant Pyrénées. Forty-eight hours later a telegram brought us the welcome news that Sœur Antoinette de la Croix had been cured by Notre Dame de Lourdes at her first plunge in the ice-cold ‘piscine,’ and that the pupils of the Lourdes Incarnation had walked in procession to the grotto, there to hang up the now useless crutches as a thanksgiving offering. The moment Sœur Terese finished reading this glorious news aloud, the whole novitiate rose as one person, and seventy voices strong, sang the ‘Te Deum’ with such hearty goodwill, as to be heard at the distant Immaculée. Antoinette returned without her crutches, and for the next few days we worshipped at the shrine of our little ‘miraculée.’ Two celebrated specialists who had studied her case from her birth came to examine her. The examination over, they shrugged their shoulders, glanced meaningly at each other, looked pityingly at the poor deluded child to whom they said a few ambiguous words of loving sympathy, then took their leave.

Alas! alas! a very short time after, the poor little girl went back to her couch, thence to her bed,

from which she never rose again. So it was just as well the crutches had been left at the grotto, as indeed they were no longer needed. She died before she reached her twenty-second year—poor little 'Toinon.

One week in the fifty-two, we gave entirely to our Celestial Spouse, namely the week of the retreat, which took place in August. During that week some strange priest, generally a noted preacher, came to give us three sermons a day. These sermons were mostly very poetical, very flowery, very flattering, but that was exactly what we liked. They all treated of the same thing: the holiness, the purity, the austerity of Christ's bride as compared to the wickedness and love of pleasure of mere man's better-half. At the end of the retreat we returned to our ordinary routine, strengthened and refreshed by the moral certitude that our Incarnation was an oasis in the desert, that we were chosen, elevated, consecrated above all other daughters of Eve. Deep down in her own heart each one of us no doubt believed herself also chosen and raised even from among the elect, even a favoured bride among other brides. It was a pleasant little conceit and, as my mother judiciously remarked, pleased us without hurting the equally self-satisfied neighbour.

The last day of the retreat, we spent in uproarious recreation, to rest mind and soul after seven days' tedious contemplation of our own sanctity and manifold perfections. This recreation generally fell on one of Mother Foundress' feast-days—she had several, as becomes one lifted so high

above mankind. We covered the community table with gifts. I don't know how we managed to think of anything new and original to give her; poor satiated old soul—she had so much already. When she entered the room in pompous state, we novices broke out in song. This song had been written by a little choir postulant—a child just sixteen, as pretty as she was talented, as talented as she was naughty. She left the Order when she reached years of discretion, and is now, I am happy to add, a useful member of society, and a good wife and mother. Little Christine, naughty puss, lived in never-ending disgrace, and when not engaged in some schoolgirl prank wrote the most charming poetry. These particular verses were really remarkable for sentiment, metre, and correctness, especially when one remembers that the author had not accomplished her sixteenth year. The subject had been given her, namely to laud and exalt the Incarnation and its foundress, at which she pertly inquired whether we could not suggest something more original for a refreshing change; but, having been soundly rated, she laughingly gave in, and succeeded beyond our expectations.

The verses put to some of Mendelssohn's music began thus :

Il est un monastère entouré de feuillage :

And ended with :

Quand tu le vois de loin, pauvre enfant de la terre,
Ton cœur frémit et tu détournes les yeux.
Ah! si tu savais le doux mystère
Le don de Dieu!

And yet there are thousands of poor children of the world who have received this gift of God, who are more unselfish, more honest, more chaste, more truthful, more charitable, and more united to our Saviour than any of us who smirkingly sang that ditty while patting ourselves on the back.

The retreat of my novitiate year was preached by a noted Jesuit. I had heard a good deal about Jesuits, but had never seen one, and longed to do so. On the eve of the retreat, as we sat in the garden, forming a circle round our adored mistress, one novice, on turning her head, espied a priest walking at a little distance, and deep in conversation with the superior of the house. 'Ma mère, ma mère,' she whispered excitedly, 'there goes the father of the retreat with Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent.'

'Well, my child!' answered Mère Agnès calmly. 'No need to excite yourself or to stare; I suppose you have seen a Jesuit before to-day.'

'But Sœur Miriam hasn't,' cried out some one in the crowd. 'Sœur Miriam, where are you? Look, there goes a Jesuit.'

I jumped up with alacrity and gazed all round me, up to the tree-tops, then at the middle of the pond. 'Where, where?' I cried excitedly.

'Well, can't you see him walking with Mère Magdalena in the 'Allée des Roses.'

I turned in that direction, and beheld a little fat tub of a man with a pink baby face covered with as much hair as you will find on the head of a new-born baby. I thought of Bourdaloue, Ravignan, Borgia, and subsided with a groan:

‘Is that a Jesuit, only that? Dear me, but the poor little man looks quite inoffensive.’

A shout of laughter greeted my naïve utterance, which of course reached the father’s ears within twenty-four hours. He enjoyed it immensely, and a few days later, when some one pointed me out to him, he wagged his finger at me with the good-humoured remark:

‘Beware, my revered Sister, not to judge from externals. I may be neither so inoffensive nor so innocent as you in your charity deem me.’

Well, I cannot say whether the good father was inoffensive or not, for I never set eyes on him again after he left us on the last day of the retreat. But I believe him to have been a very kindly, well-meaning man, and certainly a very witty one. Indeed, all the Jesuits I have met since appear to be gifted with quite an inexhaustible fund of humour. This one sometimes approached us at evening recreation, the only one allowed us during the retreat, and taking a seat beside our mistress, kept us in shrieks of laughter with his funny sayings. But his jokes and bons-mots were never coarse, never indecent, never ‘risqués.’ The intercourse between nuns and priests at the ‘Incarnation’ was ever conducted with the utmost decorum, and could not have given the most slanderous Mrs. Grundy food for gossip. Priests came and went. Priests old and young, ugly and handsome, affable and abrupt, but they never approached nuns or pupils within at least three feet, they never touched a person of the other sex, except to mark her brow with the Lenten ashes, or during the ceremony of Extreme Unction.

They never confessed us but separated by a high wooden screen pierced by a tiny perforated grille, and only confessed the sick, who could not rise from their beds, in the presence of two elderly witnesses, who were placed so as to see both penitent and confessor, without overhearing their conversation.

One most delightful story told us by the good little pink-and-white father deserves to be mentioned.

In some Roman convent there dwelt a female mystic of exalted sanctity, at least in her own estimation. To such heights of lofty ecstasy did she ascend, that Saint Peter chose her for his own familiar friend, and held long intercourse with her each day. During these daily visits the Prince of Apostles gave her a message for Leo XIII and bade her deliver it without delay. She immediately sent word to the Vatican, and urgently demanded a private audience. The good old 'Papa' hummed, hawed, and finally, deeming discretion the better part of valour, put the letter into the waste-paper basket and with most reprehensible pusillanimity pretended not to have received it. But other letters came pouring in by every post, while the luckless Vicar of Christ moaned aloud. 'I'm an old man,' he cried, 'a broken old man, too weak and decrepit to manage ladies, particularly in private audiences. They talk all the time, they refuse to observe the most elementary rules of punctuation, and they won't let me get a word in edgeways. If Saint Peter has any fault to find with me, let him come and say it to my face like a man. He ought to know his way to the Vatican after eighteen centuries.'

Thus Christ's Vicar lamented one day to a friend

of his, a well-known Italian Jesuit and famous orator, ending with the words: 'You are young, you are handsome, you have a way with the ladies that I can but envy you, yet know not how to imitate. Why shouldn't you interview this good young woman, and obtain for me rest and quiet in my old age?'

The Jesuit rose, bowed gravely, at the same time favouring the August Head of 'Ecclesiae Militantis' with a portentous wink, to receive an equally portentous and very unpontifical wink in answer. He then took his departure after promising that no more messages from Saint Peter or any other inhabitant of Celestial Realms should come to disturb the night rest His Holiness so sorely needed.

Half an hour later he arrived at the convent and hat in hand, for a Jesuit is nearly always—I may say always—a gentleman, courteously requested the portress to obtain from the superior permission for him to interview Sœur Ersilia (the apostle's lady friend). He was shown into the parlour, where a moment later that mystic joined him, hopping radiantly into his presence. He rose, bowed low, requested her to take a seat, then reseated himself and remained silently gazing at her with keen scrutiny during the space of five seconds. Then he spoke in dulcet tones:

'So you are the saintly sister to whom Saint Peter reveals the secret of Our Mother Church?'

'I am, Father,' she gushed, as she ecstatically smiled into his face. 'I am the humble little bride of Jesus, chosen from among millions by the

Prince of the Apostles, and in whom alone he deigns to confide. And thus does he speak to me——'

'Gently, gently, holy sister! You will tell me afterwards what Saint Peter said. But first I want to know at what hour he usually appears.'

'It is always after dinner during the siesta. When I repose in my cell he comes to me and he says——'

'Not quite so fast, sister! Will you kindly tell me what you drink at the end of your repast?'

The sister looked shocked and surprised. Fancy talking of base food and drink at such a portentous interview, when the interests of entire Church Militant were at stake. Petulantly she rejoined:

'I drink my little glass "de vino blanco" as we all do, but what of that? Saint Peter comes to me with open arms and smiling lovingly into my eyes, he says——'

'Saint Peter must have his say later on. Piano, revered sister; piano! piano! pianissimo! Let us recapitulate: You have dinner; m'm . . . ! Then you drink one little glass, "de vino blanco"; m'm . . . m'm . . . ! Then you see Saint Peter; m'm, m'm, m'm! Well sister!—jumping up like an electric Jack in the box—you drink two little glasses "de vino blanco," and then you will also see Saint Paul.'

•He had banged his hat on his head, and was thumping down the Piazza di Spagna at the rate of twenty miles an hour before the bewildered mystic recovered her scattered senses. Whether Saint Peter again appeared to her after her first

little glass of 'vino blanco,' whether she imbibed a second little glass of that innocent beverage in the hopes of receiving a friendly nod from Saint Paul, our retreat father could not tell us. But one thing is certain, the courtly Jesuit, beloved by ladies, redeemed his promise to the Papal See, for never again till the hour of his death did Leo XIII receive messages from his spiritual ancestor transmitted by the fair hands of cloistered virgins.

For all Jesuits sometimes visited us, preached our retreats, officiated at one or the other of our multitudinous ceremonies, yet they were not particular favourites of ours. I have an idea they were just a little too sarcastic, too sceptical concerning the spiritual favours showered on our holiest members. To behold a shrewd eye merrily twinkling at you, while with flushed cheeks and drooping lashes you bashfully give a faithful account of your last ecstasy but one may possibly be slightly disconcerting; and still more so to be told with gentle courtesy, albeit with great firmness, that a kindly thought, a gentle word, an unselfish action may be of more value in God's sight than a vision of several hours' duration. So, although we esteemed the sons of Ignatius, although we treated them with the marked distant respect we showed to all the clergy, we didn't exactly fancy them. I remember one old Jesuit telling us at a Lenten sermon that among his penitents he had a young widow who earned, on a third-rate variety stage, barely enough to clothe and feed her two babies, while she herself went oft-times cold and hungry. And he bluntly concluded by assuring us

that he doubted whether God would find a single one in our midst whom He might deem worthy to sit at the poor little dancer's feet in the Celestial Realms above, so truly humble, mortified, unselfish and united to her Redeemer was she, in spite of her spangled tights and painted cheeks. This was not pleasant hearing, and several of our more exalted saints left the chapel looking as if they had just swallowed an over-dose of Epsom salts. We never invited the chorus girl's confessor to preach any more sermons within our hallowed walls.

All our love—a perfectly pure platonic love—we bestowed on the Benedictine monks of Solesme, especially after we squabbled with the Incarnation fathers. The Benedictine Order is the most ancient, the most monastic of all orders. Round it, lies the glamour of medieval romance; aye, it carries one up past the Middle Ages, to the very beginning of the Christian era.

Repeatedly, we invited a black-robed 'Dom' to come and preach God's Word in our gem of a chapel, and very picturesque he looked, standing on the altar step with arms uplifted, tonsured head thrown back, strapped at the waist with ascetic simplicity, his naked sandalled feet showing under his flowing garb, covered with the long scapular; while the natty little Jesuit, fresh for his morning tub, in his tight-fitting habit, with his well-manicured hands and courtly manner, proved altogether too twentieth century to please our æsthetic tastes.

Flattered by our openly avowed admiration, the Prior of Solesmes invited Mère Générale and our

novice mistress to go and spend a fortnight at their priory of Saint Scholastica, as guests of the Benedictine nuns. The two returned Benedictine-struck—or rather Mère Agnès did. We, of course, followed her lead, and grew frenzied in our desire to emulate those experts in mystic lore, who having no schools, no works of charity, no sick nursing, spent their days studying divinity and philosophy. With renewed ardour we tackled our whimsical studies, we quoted Ambrose and Augustine, Aquinas and Ribera in and out of season (usually out ; but what of that ?), while we wondered whether the Sorbonne had ever heard so much erudition as was daily expounded in our midst.

But above all things we were ambitious to pronounce our Latin according to Solesmes rules of pronunciation. During the first fifty-three years of its existence, the Incarnation had been modestly satisfied with the none too euphonious Gallic Latin taught in French lycées. But this could no longer be regarded as sufficiently monastic, so we set ourselves to master the new pronunciation brought back by Mère Agnès, whose quick intelligence enabled her to acquire it within a fortnight. The day we exhibited our newly learnt science in the choir, a revolution threatened to shake our equally newly made Order to its very foundations. The older nuns were indignant at our insolence, these little novices in their brand new habits setting themselves to teach their seniors ! What next ? they desired to know. The feud between novitiate and great community lasted over two years ; but was a good-humoured one in the main, and mostly ended each

day in peals of laughter. When it did grow more virulent on rare occasions, the combatants always met after evening 'Obedience' to kneel, explain, kiss cheek, kiss floor, bump heads in proper canonical style. The grievous question remained an open one till the abdication of Chérubin de Jésus, for the dear old foundress, now completely in her dotage, could not be brought to understand what all the fuss was about. At her abdication (of which she alone remained in total ignorance till the hour of her death) we elected one Marie de l'Epoux Celeste, a gaunt Scotch dame, who united in her person the phlegm of her entire Presbyterian ancestry, and looked as if she had swallowed the Covenant, but not yet digested it. She sided with the Conservatives—the old school; and ridding herself of Mère Agnès, a somewhat too daring innovator, by packing the latter off to our new foundation in the Central Americas, she placed one of her own creatures at the head of the novitiate, bidding her teach her arrogant, pert little charges, to put away their philosophical, psychological, theological studies, to darn the Community's stockings better than they had done heretofore; while they held their tongues, obeyed their seniors, minded their own concerns, and behaved themselves. And in all that, I can but think she proved herself a remarkably sensible, level-headed, and wise woman.

CHAPTER V

I HAVE as yet said nothing of the Easter ceremonies, which were very beautiful and solemn indeed. They began at four o'clock in the afternoon of the Wednesday in Holy Week. All the statues, paintings, and Ways of the Cross being shrouded in purple hangings, we sang 'Tenebrae' in mournful minor key, the 'Lamentations of Jeremiah' being exquisitely rendered by our three best sopranos. After Thursday's solemn High Mass, at which everybody—even the gardener and servants attached to the outer buildings—received Holy Communion, we carried the one remaining Host to the strangers' chapel, converted into a gorgeous sepulchre, and here we knelt in perpetual adoration—replacing each other in groups of four till the following day at dawn. The popular favourites received the much coveted watches between nine and midnight. The nonentities contented themselves with the bleak dreary hours before dawn, and when all—even the celestial bodies—are evidently warm in sleep, for we received none of the heavenly favours showered on our luckier sisters.

On Thursday afternoon the washing of feet took place with grand pomp in the middle of the choir.

Three professed choir nuns, three lay-sisters, three children of Mary, and three novices were chosen to represent the twelve apostles ; but also received strict orders beforehand to scrub their right feet in hot soapy water (an ablution the left feet needed just as badly) and then lavishly to perfume them with eau de Cologne, so as to render the task as pleasant as possible to Mère Magdalena, who that year represented Jesus. I wonder whether Our Saviour made His disciples drench their feet with aromatics (Maria Farina not having discovered eau de Cologne in those days). Probably not, but then His fastidious little brides were daintier than He.

On Friday afternoon, we adored the Crucifix with equally bombastic pomp. Everything we did, we did with pomp and bombast. Two and two we walked bare-footed through the aisle, making high-falutin' genuflexions at three different points, so that six of us genuflected together, two at point A close to the altar, two at point B in the very centre of the choir, where the lectern usually stood, and two in front of the red curtain, while the remainder advanced slowly in single file on each side of the choir, carrying tapers and singing the ' Dulce Lignum, Crux fidelis.' Arrived at the foot of the altar, the two foremost kissed the Crucifix that lay on a purple cushion, then rose, branched off, one to the left, one to the right, to swell the outer single file that was going in contrary direction to the inner one ; so that from the gallery, the whole thing looked like a pious quadrille or ballet dance, and a very effective one too.

On Holy Saturday, we partially returned to

every-day life. Statues and paintings were uncovered, the new fire blessed, the organ gave sweet music once more. During the afternoon the priest, preceded by a small procession of nuns, went from room to room, blessing the whole house. In consequence of some misunderstanding between sacristan and 'Moyenne Class' mistress, the procession passed through the dormitory 'des Saints Innocents' just as the juniors were having their hair brushed. A ripple of merriment ran through the vast apartment, but M. l'Abbé, ever equal to the occasion, placed his hands before his eyes, and deep in prayer, passed unseeing in their midst. Not so the rascally little choir-boys, who preceded him with censers and holy water stoups, They most thoroughly enjoyed the situation, and giggled audibly at the unwonted sight of young ladies in their dressing-jackets.

Easter Sunday ceremonies—Grand Mass, solemn Vespers, gorgeous Benediction filled the day, which we spent in chapel, nearly suffocated by the heavily perfumed, incense-laden air, heated by hundreds of wax tapers. To the sound of organ, violin, 'cello, harp, and thirty sweet voices, we revelled in ecstatic bliss, to begin revels of a different kind after Complines. Then we started an eight days' junketing, having returned the majority of our pupils to the paternal roof and locked the remaining minority in the Gymnasium hall with strict injunctions to remain out of sight and out of hearing.

We played 'Grande Cache-Cache' all over the house; hare-and-hounds, all over the grounds. We sat down to eight-course dinners, we sang, we

danced, we romped, we got up theatricals and thoroughly enjoyed life to begin again in Whitsuntide week. Oh, monastic life is not so black as it is painted! The cloister is not the gloomy, ghastly, grave-like abode so many uninitiated imagine.

There remains one little ceremony attached to all these feasts, which I must not pass over in silence—namely, the so-called ‘tirage des petits papiers,’ a ceremony so puerile, so infantile, and performed with such grotesque solemnity as to make one wonder how anybody who has passed his or her fifth birthday can witness it without hilarity.

At the midday recreation of each important feast, we assembled in austere silence round the Superior, in front of whom stood a small wicker basket filled to the brim with tightly-folded scraps of paper. After silent prayer, the basket slowly travelled round, while each sister helped herself to a paper. The first part of this elaborate ceremony safely accomplished, we all opened our papers and read the few words written inside, which always had some connection with that day’s celebration. Thus on Christmas Day, we drew the toys of the Infant Jesus, each one of us to represent a different toy during the coming year. One was the ball to rebound Heavenwards, another the skipping rope to whirl joyously in God’s service, another the dolly to submit silently to God’s will, as a doll silently submits to the drastic treatment of its baby owner.

On the feast of Saint Aloysia, the patron saint of novices, we drew his many virtues, as an incentive to put the one that fell to our share specially into

practice. This Aloysia Gonzague was a pet aversion of mine. Of all his many virtues, his chastity proved the greatest. So chaste, so pure, so continent was he, that at the age of two he refused to uncover his feet in the presence of his nurse. At three he would not look his mother in the face, for fear of being tempted by a woman. Precocious little abomination! What depraved thoughts must have been working in that infantile brain, for him to arrive at such preposterous conclusions!

But the nuns thought differently, and ever held this particular saint up to the veneration of novices and pupils. Perfectly chaste, pure and innocent themselves, these good ladies made the one great mistake of everlastingly talking on matters which Englishwomen prefer to ignore. The words 'chastity', 'decency', 'continence' were continually on their lips. Unceasingly they exhorted their children not to touch one another—even in play. For two girls to be caught with their arms round each other's waist, constituted nearly a mortal offence, and they received stern reprimand, while the guileless delinquents were nearly always perfectly innocent and ignorant of harm.

One day a nun gave her baby division a catechism lesson, and urged them during the whole hour never to shock their guardian angel by exposing themselves unnecessarily while dressing and undressing. She reminded them over and over again that only those who behaved with the strictest decorum could ever hope to become true children of the purest of virgins. What English pedagogue would dream of discussing such topics with kiddies

under eight? The Frenchies gravely listened, and solemnly promised to consider their guardian angel's somewhat ultra-strict notions of the proprieties.

A couple of days later that same nun, passing the dormitory 'des Saints Chérubims' at an hour when all the children were supposed to be in their class-rooms, felt no little surprise on hearing infantile prattle issuing from the interior. Peeping through the half-open door, she beheld the two most promising pupils of her own catechism class standing—oh weep, ye angels!—in front of a looking-glass without a stitch to their backs. For a moment she remained rooted to the spot, too overcome to stir; then dashing forward and seizing each small sinner by the arm, she asked with trembling voice, and eyes averted, what they were doing? Germaine de Longueville, a brown-eyed maiden of seven summers, looked up into her teacher's face with solemn gaze. 'Ma mère,' she politely and lucidly explained, 'Étiennette and I are trying to discover what it is that makes our guardian angel cover his face with his wings each time we take our chemises off.'

'And now I think I know,' came five-year-old Étienne de Villemar's little pipe. 'My guardian angel likes me best in my new pink frock. So do I, it's a much prettier pink than my skin.'

The delicious candour and utter purity of these babyish remarks might have disarmed a mature woman of forty. Not so the nun. She threw the children's clothes at them, bidding them in anguished tones cover themselves.

'Hasten, hasten, O my children!' she

implored. 'The celestial choirs weep with veiled faces at this awful sight.'

With puzzled mien the tots hastened to obey, and hustled their naughty little bodies into their bits of wearing apparel. When they were clothed and in their right minds, Madame Marie Dominique took them to a small class-room, and seating herself on the teacher's chair, placed the two tiny culprits in front of her, and in solemn gentle tones appealed to their better feelings.

'My children you have sinned, sinned grievously. You never can forgive yourselves, but Jesus and Mary in their great goodness may forgive you, if you seek them with a humbled and contrite heart. I will send round to M. l'Abbé and request his immediate attendance in the confessional, for we cannot allow you to take those black little souls to bed, for fear you die in the night. While awaiting the confessor, let us all three go to Mary's chapel, and in front of her altar implore her to make you pure and spotless as herself.'

* She rose, and followed by these two moral lepers, went into the big class-room to fetch their chapel veils. I happened to be on guard at that moment, and we all stared in surprise at this strange procession of three walking up the centre passage, the two mites simply bursting with ill-concealed pride and importance at finding themselves surrounded by so much mystery and the centre of attraction.

'What is it all about, what have you and Étiennette been doing?' I heard one child whisper, into Mademoiselle de Longueville's ear.

‘We are both in a state of mortal sin,’ returned this promising young Jezebel, with calm superiority. ‘And M. l’Abbé is coming expressly to confess us and nobody else.’ She then trotted triumphantly behind the nun, looking as proud as if the Order of the Golden Fleece had just been conferred on her.

M. l’Abbé of that particular house happened to be a very enlightened, very sensible, very witty secular priest. Also, I am convinced that if the nun did not see the humour of the situation, he did, and indulged in a fit of unholy, if silent, merriment behind his latticed grille, while he pronounced the solemn words of Absolution on the bowed heads of these two fallen virgins.

CHAPTER VI

MEANWHILE the days of my novitiate flew by, and already I began to wonder what would happen to me, when I had accomplished my canonical twelve months. Then, one afternoon, the portress appeared at the noonday recreation to inform our mistress that Sœur Miriam's brother asked permission to see his sister. Having obtained the necessary consent I took off my apron, pulled down my long sleeves, let down my habit over my black petticoat and thus in great gala proceeded to the parlour—it being only in choir, parlour, refectory, and chapter-room that we appeared in full dress. During the remainder of the day we hooked our habits round the waist, rolled up the sleeves and completely covered ourselves with huge black aprons.

In the parlour I found my brother William, a young Oxonian, spending his vacation in Paris, ostensibly to acquire the accent. He bombarded me with a volley of questions concerning priests, monks, nuns, and, having obtained as much information as I had to bestow on him, asked point-blank if I were happy.

My vague nod of assent hardly satisfied him :

'You're not!' he bluntly returned. 'You hate the life, and you're a fool to remain.'

'Where else am I to go?' I doggedly inquired. 'Mother won't have me home, and I cannot live on the street.'

'Mother would be forced to have you home, if you insisted.'

'But she wouldn't make me welcome.'

'Well! I can't quite promise that; but she certainly would not turn you adrift on the street; so don't talk like an ass. And even if she did—many a woman as young and younger than yourself earns an independent living. What do you do here all day?'

'Teach.'

'Well, and who's to prevent you teaching on the other side of the wall?'

I pondered, then shook my head. 'Too late now,' I murmured. 'I have made my choice and must abide by it. I am the bride of Jesus. To leave Him now would be as if He had divorced me.'

'And a jolly good turn He will have done Himself the day He gets His "decree nisi,"' retorted my brother somewhat profanely, as with a jolly laugh he rose to take his leave.

In after years I also laughed on recalling this most irreverent joke; but at the time I could not see the humour of it. The very word 'defroquée' sent cold shivers down my back. To be a 'defroquée' according to monastic ideas is to be a criminal of the deepest dye. Jesus forgave the thief on the Cross, He forgave the Samaritan at the well,

He would and could forgive the most heinous sins. But Judas received no pardon, and he lives again and again in every unfrocked monk and nun. For the woman who, after being exalted to the glorious privilege of calling herself the spouse of Jesus, returned to the husks, there could be no possible salvation. So our Superior taught us; so we all believed.

Postulants, novices, young professes came and went. Some were sent away, some withdrew of their own sweet will; but their memory was ever after kept green by the execration, bitter contempt, and disgust with which we mentioned their names. The novice mistress held forth at recreation on the utter depravity of such renegades. She left them never a shred of character, allowed them not one redeeming point. It made me sick and sorry to hear her.

I remember one such a case—a dear girl! There had been three twin sisters with me at school—three charming girls; but dainty, delicate, real hothouse flowers unable to bear a snub, a harsh word, a breath of cold air. Two returned to their paternal roof once their education was accomplished. They married, had children, and are this day good, contented Christian women. But the third—Majol we called her—in an evil hour fell in love with one of the nuns. Her ‘toquade,’ having pointed out to her that the ordinary, commonplace destiny of her sisters was not good enough for such as she, assured her that Jesus had chosen her from among millions for His own. She was fairer, more beautiful in His eyes than other daughters

of Eve. To all this twaddle the poor deluded little fool listened with sparkling eyes, and when the time came for her sisters to go home, she remained behind, deaf to their entreaties. Triumphantly her 'toquade' brought her and her substantial dowry inside the enclosure. They placed the cap on her pretty wavy hair, and dubbed her henceforth Electa de Jésus. Three months later she took the habit, amid great pomp, for as long as her 'toquade' remained at Neuilly she enjoyed herself well enough. She had plenty of money, came of a well-known family of title, and therefore got petted and made much of by the superiors. But soon the gilt wore off the gingerbread. Life palled, and she began to fret, especially after each visit from the twin sisters, who brought husbands and babies to the parlour, and whose peaceful, radiant faces went far to prove that the world is not such a God-forsaken place as we holy ones would have; while her own peevish, fretful expression filled the kindly twins with sad forebodings. By dint of much coaxing and persuasion, the nuns got her to pronounce her temporary vows. But in the end all their efforts proved of no avail; before Electa had terminated her two years of obligation, she insisted on going. They put her in a gilded cage, they loaded her with dainties and favours, they sent her to Cannes, the place that contained her old 'toquade,' who put forth all her powers of attraction—but to no avail. So at last the nuns, who ill-treated no one, retained no one forcibly, opened the cage and let the bird with the golden eggs fly away, never to return. At an evening recreation presided over

by Teresa, the assistant—Mère Agnès being ill at the time—we learnt of poor Electa's apostasy. No more the Electa, the chosen of Jesus, but a miserable little worldling like her sisters. The way our saintly assistant spoke of this guileless girl filled me with such unutterable misery that for days after I remained depressed and wretched at the thought of poor little Majol, whom I had loved, being henceforth an outcast from God's grace.

Strangely enough I met her in the streets of Paris years after, when my own views had greatly altered. Both mature women at the time, she was first to recognise me, and insisted on taking me to her luxurious west-end home for a chat. Proudly she showed me her two pretty little daughters, and after we had recalled old times, she remarked :

‘You may be surprised to hear, Miriam, that I never felt nearer God than since I left the Incarnation.’

I assured her that, having gone through similar experiences, I felt no surprise.

She continued : ‘We were children then, we could neither comprehend nor realise the absurdity, the uselessness of so unnatural a life—we called it supernatural in those days. It is out in the world, where a woman lives for others, suffers for others, and in silence forgets herself in her care of husband and children, that she finds her God, and loves Him, not in that masquerading carnival we called mystical life. Had we spent our days, nursing sick paupers, tending and educating slum

children, then perhaps we might have had a certain right to call our life one of sacrifice and sublime devotion. But what great things did we do for God ? We taught the daughters of rich and titled men who paid us liberally, very liberally, for our tuition, not to mention the extras. The money went into our pockets ; then, wherein lay the sacrifice ? Every shop-keeper in Paris has the same right to pretend that he works for God alone, while he shovels the money into his till, and I doubt whether many a Rue de Rivoli shopkeeper makes such good profits as the ladies of the Incarnation.'

I laughed. Majol rattled on : 'It is the greatest aim of my life to rear my children in a solid Christian faith ; I want them to be true, honest Christian women ; but never shall they place their foot inside a convent. They are now being educated at the Cours laïque de la Rue Cadet.'

On receiving this last piece of information, I burst out laughing, while I cried in pretended horror : 'Oh Majol, the Cours laïque ! Oh, you pagan ! What would the nuns say if they knew you sent your little ones to such a place of abomination and desolation ?'

'Yes, wouldn't they be shocked ? They always taught us that secular teachers were the devil's favourite instruments. Yet Miriam, I wish you could make the acquaintance of this Madame C——, the lady principal of the Cours Rue Cadet. At the Incarnation we were everlastingly calling ourselves and each other saints ; yet I never really knew what the word meant, till I met Madame C——. Miriam, that woman is a saint—

a true saint. She hardly ever mentions Our Saviour's holy name, yet she lives His life in every thought, word, and deed. She is so grand, so lofty, so true-hearted, so unselfish. And the way she educates those children!—it is grand. They are never policed, as we were at the Incarnation. Madame C—— trusts them, she takes for granted that they are incapable of deceiving her, and simply puts them on their honour. Also her system has its full reward, I do not think one child out of a thousand abuses her trust. Of “toquades” her children know nothing. You remember the harm those sorts of infatuations did us, to say nothing of the time we wasted over them. Well! the other day I asked my little Renée if she had a “toquade.” She required to know what the word meant; I explained. Then she told me that the pupils liked and respected all their teachers; perhaps Madame C—— a little more than the others, but raved for none. Nay!’ concluded Majol, ‘no more religious houses for me. Let my darlings grow up to serve God in the ordinary walk of life. I don’t want them to be exalted above the rest of mankind. Let them grow as much like Madame C—— as possible; I should be sorry to see them like Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent, Mère Marie de l’Eglise Celeste, or Mère Emmanuel du Cœur Percé.’

I told my old friend that she only put my own ideas into words, and afterwards when I spent a couple of hours chatting with her two pretty little girls, aged twelve and ten respectively, I realised how right she was. These children were ever so

much better educated, better informed, more advanced in their studies than any child of the Incarnation two or three years their senior, whom I have ever met. And then they were so healthy-minded, so pure-hearted, so truly and simply religious. As samples of her educational system they certainly did Madame C—— of Rue Cadet honour. And yet I had been taught to look on all ‘*écoles laïques*’ as hotbeds of vice and depravity. It is a foregone conclusion of these good ladies that to the Church alone must the education of the young be entrusted, that all children who have not passed through the hands of monks and nuns are irretrievably lost in this world and in the next.

At the present day, however, all French parents must choose between sending their darlings abroad—a thing they can rarely bring themselves to do—or placing them in the hands of the ‘*Instituteur laïque*.’ No more convent schools for little French boys and girls, and when I recall the Incarnation’s system of education, I can but think that the French Government has acted wisely and in the interests of the coming generation.

With my brother’s visit, my year of novitiate attained its end; so I began to wonder what next awaited me. A wave of frantic excitement ran just then through the whole Order. After much talk it had been decided to found a house in the Philippines, another in the Central Americas. Two small parties, composed of eight to ten nuns each, were to go—one to Manila, the other to Leon in Nicaragua. The children had gone home for the holidays. Both houses—the big convent as well

as the Immaculée were filled to overflowing with superiors and other nuns of importance, come on a visit to the 'Maison Mère.' We had recreation all day and every day; the uproar had reached a climax. Who would go? Who would be chosen? No other topic seemed of any importance.

Already eight nuns destined for Nicaragua had been named. A ninth one was still wanting. Imagine my intense surprise when one morning Notre Maîtresse called me to her sanctum to inform me that the choice had fallen on my worthlessness, insignificant person. During the next few days, I, who had passed for nearly three years silent and unnoticed in the throng, became of some importance. On the eve of the Assumption I pronounced my temporary vows in company of five others. Of the ceremony of temporary vows, I will say nothing, the ceremony of the final vows being so much more solemn and imposing.

Having pronounced her vows and received Holy Communion, the newly-made professed nun prostrates herself in the centre of the choir, and is covered by the mortuary shroud, on which four wax tapers are placed at each corner. Thus she remains, while the choir sings 'De Profundis,' and the celebrant recites the prayers for the dead, and pronounces the last absolution. Then she rises—but dead! Dead for evermore, to the outside world. She returns to the altar to receive the nuptial ring. Lastly, the officiant places on her virginal brow the crown of white roses which, after to-day, she will never wear again, until it is placed on her head as she lies in the coffin.

All this is very impressive, very grandiose, very solemn, even somewhat harrowing at the time. But when the sainted dead reappears in your midst, bringing all her foibles, her petty vanities and conceits, her childish greed and ill-temper, her selfishness, her infantile sulks, her craze for this nun, her dislike for that one; then the whole *mise-en-scène*, theatrical and bombastic as it is, also acquires a comical aspect that cannot fail to strike the least humorous person.

After three days' junketing in honour of the great Assumption feast the moment of parting arrived. The whole Community accompanied us to the vast courtyard, and, to the edification of a sympathetic cabby, sang '*Quam speciosi pedes evangelizantium pacem, evangelizantium bona,*' while we chosen ones stumbled into a station bus and drove off towards the distant shores of Nicaragua.

PART IV

AS A PROFESSED NOVICE

CHAPTER I

Even now, when I recall the Incarnation's idea of mission work, I laugh aloud. I left Neuilly with the hazy notion that we went forth to preach the Gospel to the heathens, nurse the lepers, teach the blackies, and possibly earn a martyr's crown in the end. I soon discovered that we solely intended to found a select boarding-school for young ladies belonging to the Nicaraguan Smart Set, retaining the most comfortable part of the buildings for our own use. My exaltation might have sunk to zero, had I been able to realise this just then. As it was my fervour received a considerable damper before we turned the corner of the Rue de l'Incarnation, for two of my travelling companions squabbled like kiddies over a much-coveted corner seat. They kept up their baby warfare till we reached the station, to begin again in the train. Indeed, I may here add that the quarrelling never ceased during the eighteen months I spent among my sister-missionaries. We all quarrelled (with one exception), I with as much alacrity and zest as the others. We fought about the most trivial absurdities. In the novitiate we nursed many secret dislikes and animosities, but it rarely came to open

warfare, we feared Mère Agnès too much for that. To give them their due, those terrible blue spectacles kept martial order among us, and for all I clearly recognised my mistress's many foibles, I can but acknowledge that her qualities far outweighed them, and till the end I esteemed her; whereas Mère Rosa Mystica, my new superior, never woke the slightest feeling of respect in the heart of the tiniest piccaninny or blackest nigger with whom we came in contact. I looked at her now, as she lolled opposite me in the station bus. She reminded me of nothing so much as a dead codfish, except that her face, always deep-scarlet, was completely filled with liver-spots. Tall, angular, thin as a larch, she gave the impression of having come into the world minus a spine. She lived in perpetual collapse. I never saw her but she reclined on deck, and later, in the 'patio' of our Nicaraguan convent on a low swing-chair, her flat claw-like hands—scarlet and liver-spotted like her face—spread out tentacle-like on the arms of the chair, while she slowly swung backwards and forwards with closed eyes. She ever brought to my mind the ridiculous nursery rhyme :

Un éléphant se balançait sur une toile d'araignée.
Sur une toile d'araignée un éléphant se balançait.

Only for 'elephant,' I substituted 'codfish.' If she had not Mère Agnès' qualities—her energy and iron will—neither did she possess that fiery lady's faults. Her motto 'Live and let live' she daily put into practice. She alone of our Community never quarrelled except with the 'Junta'—a kind

of Nicaraguan Parliament or Local Government Board—who called to us from over the seas to come and metamorphose their piccaninnies into ‘chic’ Parisian dames, but who, when they had us, did not quite know what to make of us, and squirmed under the rod they had prepared for their own backs. We wanted this, we wanted that—our demands were as exorbitant as they were varied; and to see the twelve members of the sacred ‘junta,’ sitting red-faced, fat and solemn, round Mère Rosa Mystica, balancing in the most comfortable swing-chair of our front ‘patio,’ would have cheered Mrs. Gum-midge for the rest of that lone, lorn widow’s mournful existence.

By her side in the station bus, sat the lucky winner of the corner seat, a fat, jovial, snub-nosed and also red-faced woman of forty, who hailed from the Incarnation External of Boulevard Haussman. Sœur Dionysia des Joies Célestes flew into passions on the slightest provocation, and jumped out of them with equal rapidity, for she possessed a heart of gold, and would have given her last crust to her bitterest foe. Why she entered a religious house I cannot say. She would have been happier selling matches on the street. Indeed, she told me one day in a moment’s expansion that during the previous winter, there sat close to the wall of their Boulevard Haussman convent, an aged woman, crippled and half-blind, selling chest-nuts. Her shrill, quavering cry, ‘Marrons chauds,’ reached Dionysia’s cell, to fill that forlorn captive’s eyes with scalding tears of envy. I pointed out by way of consolation that the old woman had

neither warm bed, good plentiful food, nor delicious hot-air pipes to carry her through the cold dreary months, to which Dionysia, who was 'un gamin des rues manqués,' retorted with heartrending groans: 'But she has the streets of Paris; what more can mortal creature desire?'

Opposite Sœur Dionysia sat her bitterest foe and dearest friend—Sœur Kathinka de l'Eternité; a pointed nosed, but otherwise rather pretty and agreeable damsel from Chicago, whose chief idiosyncrasy consisted in doing everything as slowly as possible. It was her boast and pride that she could take longer in dressing and undressing, eating a mango, blowing her nose, reciting her breviary, yawning, or making a remark, than any other human being she had ever met. Even her smile spread so slowly over her rather large, but in no wise ugly, mouth, that by the time it reached the corners, the joke had sunk into oblivion, and no one in the assembly could oblige her by recalling its more salient points. Kathinka was as thin as Dionysia was fat, as pale as her beloved enemy was scarlet, as calm and quiet as the other was hasty and noisy; and these two squabbled and kissed, kissed and squabbled unceasingly for eighteen weary months. My fourth and last companion also joined in these squabbles, siding sometimes with one, sometimes with the other. Sœur Placidie—a square peg in a round hole—was a lay-sister, better-born, better educated than the majority of lay-sisters, who had just missed being a choir-nun, possibly—poor thing—because her dowry proved insufficient. The luckless girl's life was thereby entirely em-

bittered ; so, to gild the pill, and also because she really possessed the qualities most requisite to a sick nurse, they appointed her infirmarian, an important office and usually filled by choir-nuns. The remaining four members of our new community—sisters coming from Spanish houses—were to board our vessel at Santander.

During the night we ate from our well-filled luncheon baskets, we laughed, we chatted, we felt in a very picnicky mood indeed. Feigning sleep, Dionysia bounded up when the train stopped at its first halting-place, with the delighted cry : ‘ Oh, is this Nicaragua ? Have we arrived at last ? ’ to the exquisite joy of a grinning inspector, who had entered to examine our tickets, and learn our destination from Placidie.

‘ You will arrive in six weeks, *bonne* Sœur,’ he jovially assured her. ‘ That is, if you are lucky enough to escape quarantine, which I doubt, as there have been two cases of cholera reported from Havre.’

We were accompanied to Pontailac, where we went on board, by half the community of Bordeaux. At three o’clock, we boarded the *Labrador*, our home for the next six weeks. The captain and his officers received us kindly, but were little edified, I fear, at the sight of these frolicsome cloistered virgins, who behaved like board-school children out for a treat. However they sought in every way to please us ; satisfied our clamours for the best state-rooms, the most comfortable seats in the dining saloon, the cosiest swing deck-chairs. Then we bade our Bordeaux sisters an emotional

farewell, and ranged in a straight line on deck, we squealed the 'Ave Maris Stella,' while the boat returned to European shores, and we prepared to sail the unknown deep. Our third verse ended in sea-sickness, and we disappeared below for twenty-eight hours, much to the relief of passengers, officers, and crew.

When I again appeared on deck, the first thing that met my eyes was Mère Rosa Mystica balancing in her swing-chair, and by her side, seated as close as the chairs would allow, I beheld a small, extremely dark and rather pretty nun of thirty-five or thereabouts, whom I knew to be Sœur Rosette de Lima, the Madrid sister, who had come on board at Santander, accompanied by another choir-nun from Malaga, and two lay-sisters from San Sebastian. Sœur Rosette, a native from Cuba, had been with Mère Rosa Mystica, who occupied the place of assistant for several years at the Incarnation of the Spanish capital, a Royal institute greatly patronised by Queen Christine, the then regent. The superior of this house, the already-mentioned Scotch Celeste—Caledonian by birth, Iberian by choice—was the heart's love of these two forlorn wanderers. Orphaned and in tears, they naturally sought one another's company to talk of her whom they had lost—their worshipped 'Nuestra Madrecita,' as they called the Scotch Celestial. From talking of their mutual love, they fell so hopelessly in love with one another, that henceforth nothing could part them. They shared the same cell at night, and during the day sat glued together like the Siamese twins.

From the contemplation of these two cooing doves, I passed on to that of my other new sisters. The two lay-sisters, Sœur Raymonda and Sœur Salvador, sat quietly in a corner saying their beads, when they were not mending our clothes. Both humble, pious, unselfish—they passed in our midst unseen and unheard, effacing themselves on all possible occasions, only coming forward when their services were required. They took the last place among us in the sight of man. In the sight of God they were infinitely our superiors.

The fourth newcomer awoke my keenest interest. An Englishwoman from Yorkshire, the doyenne of our party, as she had attained the mature age of fifty-nine, while the other seven ranged from thirty-five to forty-eight, and I had just celebrated my twenty-second birthday, Sœur Adelaide de la Sainte Maternité, still an extremely pretty woman, must have been a beauty at thirty. Intelligent, brilliant, witty, well-educated, and marvellously gifted, she had travelled all over the world, seen everything, read everything, and proved the most delightful companion one could wish to have. Just sufficiently eccentric to be amusing, she had but one weakness—but it proved an all absorbing one; namely her affection for Padre Padilla, our new chaplain, who also joined us at Santander. To this youthful cleric, she behaved as a doting grandam to a best-beloved grandson. She pursued and dodged him from saloon to smoking-room, from dining-room to deck with wrappers for his throat and comforters for his soul. She besieged him from dawn to sunset with her scruples and

heartaches. The poor lad also dodged her in search of escape; but less nimbly, and therefore with scant success. For my part I secretly disliked and despised him. I soon learnt how infinitely above me he stood. In age barely thirty, he looked years older. So bald that the tonsure was no longer traceable, small, fat, red-faced, snub-nosed, round as a beer-barrel, with tiny pig's eyes, enormous ears, and a perfectly round mouth, no bigger than a baby's. He bored me intensely with his roars of laughter, his stale jokes and irresistible merriment. At the time, I believed him capable of nothing save eating and laughing at his own doubtful witticisms. Six months after, I discovered that he knew also how to die—as heroes die.

We had been installed half a year in our new home—in which he everlastingly roamed, like a tame cat, from Mass till Benediction, when he returned to his own quarters in the town—when we received news from a non-distant farm that five of its inhabitants lay dying of a very pernicious, very catching fever, and clamoured vainly for a priest.

‘Why,’ said Padre Padilla one day, as he stood in our ‘patio,’ tracing a fat finger over a Nicaraguan local map pinned up on the wall, ‘why, I seem to be the priest living nearest Munoz’s “hacienda” since Padre Araña has sailed to Europe for his holidays. Then it is to me they call.’ With that childlike simplicity that ever distinguished him, he reached for his wide-flapping ‘sombrero,’ then turned to the chapel door, saying :

‘I must get Jerez to give me a lift before he

unharnesses. But first I will fetch the pyx and the holy oils. Vamos, Sor Sacristan, don't dawdle.'

In vain the nuns implored, cried, argued. In vain two Leon doctors—cronies of his, for Padilla was a cheery little man who made friends with the entire population the moment we set foot on Central American soil—hastened to our convent, on hearing of his decision, to warn him that he—of all people—was not in the state of health requisite for such a venture. In vain the Bishop of Leon, to whom Mère Rosa Mystica sent in her distress, begged the young Spaniard not to throw away a valuable life. The 'hacienda,' close to the low-lying Pacific shore, was the last place to which newly-arrived Europeans could venture with impunity at that time of year. Padre Padillo's parrot-like answer never varied :

'I hear immortal souls calling to me. Look sharp, Sœur Rosetta, I must be off.'

And he went—never to return. The next thing we heard of him was how the niggers shovelled away the martyr's remains before they were cold. He died at his post—died like a hero, brave man and true that he was, and died—as we learnt later, joking to the last. The ugly old negro woman, who gave him a rough nursing of sorts, bent sobbing over his wretched pallet at the last moment, to dab his white lips with some horrible liquid which to the poorer natives takes the place of brandy, sobbing aloud the while. Momentarily roused from his death-like trance, he glanced up at the hideous black face, and with the ghost of his old cheery laugh, exclaimed :

‘What are you howling about, *madrecita*? Are your love affairs in so hopeless a state, that you needs must ruin those pretty eyes?’

‘*Aie de mi, aie de mi, muchacho!*’ she whimpered. ‘I grieve for you, who are too young to die, and for us who need you so.’

‘What are youth and age in the face of Eternity?’ he gently queried. ‘I have finished the work my Master sent me to do, now He calls me home. Other priests, holier, worthier, cleverer than I, will come to fill my place so much better.’

The nuns cried aloud, when they heard that he died without absolution, extreme unction, articulo in extremis prayers. They cried still more on being told how they carried him to his last rest without funeral pomp of the most elementary kind. Is he less a saint and martyr for that, I query?

Sœur Adelaide wandered round the ‘patio’ with swollen eyes and drawn white face for many weeks—nor would she be consoled. Neither could she undertake her duties in the school, which fell on my already overburdened shoulders—as I, being so much the youngest of the community, received the lion’s share of work.

‘It is something for you to remember,’ said I one day, in the forlorn hope of bringing her back to her second division, ‘that he died in the accomplishment of his duty. Can mortal man desire more glorious death?’

But Sœur Adelaide could not see things from my point of view. His duty, according to her, consisted in remaining in Leon and looking after the tiny souls of Jesus’ brides. Only the adjective is of my

invention ; she used a more bombastic qualification. I left her to bemoan her soul's orphaned state, and passing the open door of the priest's parlour, I glanced in. On the wall hung the dead Padre's framed portrait, placed there by himself in a fit of uproarious jocundity. I entered and stood gazing some minutes at the fat fleshy face and pursy mouth. As I looked, I recalled an incident of our journey. It is a quaint, charming custom in Spain to kiss the priest's fingers immediately after Mass. One Sunday on deck, Spanish passengers and nuns hastened to comply. I drew back disgusted, I would not have kissed his fingers for a kingdom. Noting my look of repulsion he wagged his finger at me and said good-humouredly :—

‘Little English heretic ! Fie, fie ! You must see the priest in me, not the man. These fingers,’—holding up his stumpy red paws—‘all unworthy though they are, have just handled the Redeemer's Body.’

The other sisters scolded, snubbed, insisted ; but to no avail. I hid in my cabin till the matter had blown over. Now, as I gazed at the portrait through my tears, I whispered : ‘I despised you—I dared to think myself above you whose shoe-strings I was not fit to untie. I would not kiss your hand, yet now—could you but return—gladly would I kneel in the dust to kiss your feet, and feel myself honoured in the act.’ But he never returned, and after we had sung a grand Requiem Mass for that great noble soul that needed not our petty little prayers, we speedily forgot him, leaving him to sleep in his lonely unconsecrated grave on that

desolate Pacific shore, washed by the eternal waves, far from home and kindred, until the day, when his Master will awake him with the call : ' Arise, thou good and faithful servant, arise ! '

Sœur Adelaide found speedy consolation in the person of Padre Canuto Reyes, a guileless, smooth-faced Nicaraguan priest, who looked as if he had no business out of his nursery, and was as wax in the hands of our Yorkshire dame. He acted as our chaplain until they sent a new chaplain over from Europe, which did not happen until long after I had returned to the Old World.

But I have been looking far ahead. As yet we had but just begun our journey, which lasted from the twentieth of August till the third of November. Oh, the dullness of those days spent on deck ! Rosette and Rosa Mystica sat together, engrossed in one another and in their memories. Dionysia, Kathinka, and Placidie squabbled and joked with one another and with passengers and officers. Adelaide sought high and low for her fat boy, as I dubbed him till I learnt to think of him as one of God's martyred saints. Raymonda and Salvador sat apart, sewing and saying their beads, while I wandered to and fro, pouncing on any book some unwary passenger had left about, and hiding away to read it. Let me add in justice to myself, that when I picked up some indecent French novel—as I so often did,—I immediately threw it down again without a second glance. But one never-to-be-forgotten afternoon I chanced to alight on some of Dumas' romances. I nearly jumped with delight. Only those who love history, as I have

ever done, can comprehend the exuberant joy of that moment. Ensconced behind a thick coil of rope, I revelled for hours in the 'Memoires d'un Physicien.' From that day I was only seen at meals and Mass, which Padre Padilla celebrated each morning in the saloon. For the rest, I forgot beads and orisons, Latin breviary and spiritual reading, to dream myself back in the days of Louis XV. More shame to me! for had I not a short three weeks ago vowed obedience before God's altar, and was I not grossly violating that very vow by reading novels without my superior's consent? Meanwhile that superior, not seeing me, forgot my existence, as did the other nuns.

One day we were nearing Guadeloupe, I sat at my usual place, poring over the woes of poor Marie Antoinette and the vicissitudes of that world-famed necklace, when a most welcome shade screened me from the darting rays of a tropical sun. Hastily glancing up, I beheld a young and handsome man, to whom I had never spoken, but in whom I recognised one M. de Terves, a gentleman returning to his Guadeloupe home after a month's holiday on the boulevards. He gazed amusedly at me with a whimsical twinkle in his kindly blue eyes, as he said: 'Well, saintly sister, so you too enjoy Dumas. I am flattered to see that we both nourish similar tastes.'

Burning with shame, I sprang to my feet, recklessly determined to save at least the honour of my Order. 'Monsieur,' I blurted out, 'here is your book. I did terribly wrong to take it. But do not judge other nuns by me, who am but an imperfect

novice, quite at the beginning of my career. I am truly remorseful.'

'I see no cause for remorse, little sister, at being caught reading "*Le Collier de la Reine*." When my small daughter reaches your age—she will be eighteen months on Sunday'—he interpolated with a laugh, 'I shall be most careful to allow no bad books to come within her reach. But my Dumas shall ever be at her disposal.'

'I know, I know, Monsieur. But then I am a nun, vowed to Holy Obedience, who have not obtained my superior's consent.'

'Why not go and fetch it?' he said, with a none too respectful glance at the two drooping roses under the awning.

'I will, Monsieur,' said I with firm resolve. 'And thank you for your goodness.'

He nodded kindly as he turned to go, saying: 'Tell Madame la Supérieure that I have plenty of good books to lend you, and that she may trust me.'

I hastened towards the awning, and on my way, passed in front of dear little Raymonda, who since breakfast had been unpicking the dust-laden skirt of *Sœur Kathinka de l'Éternité*, while that frivolous young lady from Chicago joked hysterically, yet with praiseworthy slowness, with the second mate. How happy and peaceful she looked, the humble little Basque peasant, her round child-like face enframed in the snow-white wimple. The dust from the petticoat, flying down her throat, must have parched it to the temperature of Margate sands on a broiling day in August, while the fierce

sun blazing on her bent back brought thick drops of perspiration to her flushed brow. I seated myself at her side for a few moments and watched her nimble fingers in silence. Then I muttered, speaking more to myself than to her : ' If God could but bestow on me the grace of being mortified and holy like you.'

She shook her head with mock disapproval, as she answered, ' Now, Sœur Miriam, I have heard all about you and your love of quizzing. Don't think to come over me with your jokes.'

' But if I really mean it,' I insisted. ' If I am truly sincere in my desire to imitate those holier than myself ?'

' You do right,' she returned in graver tones, ' to wish to take example from God's most sainted spouses. But do not seek it in an imperfect little lay-sister, who can barely read or write. Look up to our revered Mother and our holy choir-sisters, then do as they.'

I stared yawningly around me. Ought I to go and flirt with the second mate (I fear he would have shown marked preference for Kathinka's pretty face) ? Ought I to squabble with Dionysia and Placidie, scold Padilla for sitting on deck with bald pate soaking in the sun, or talk of Nuestra Madrecita's lovely face, funny sayings and sweet looks, with Rosette and Rosa Mystica ? Surely I might be just as profitably employed reading Dumas. I said no more, however, Why disturb her in her sweet humility ? She and Salvador were the only two saints in our community. Yet they knew it not—nor the others either. But

I knew it, and as I walked away, I cried back :
'Adios, Sor Raymonda, pregate per me.'

'Indeed I will,' she gaily returned. 'And you must pray for me. We both need it.'

A moment later, I stood behind Reverend Mother's chair. The two stopped talking, for they knew that I, alone of the English and French nuns, understood the Spanish language. Both turned and stared unblinkingly at me, while I awkwardly stammered that I should like a few words with Notre Mère, hoping that Sœur Rosette de Lima might take the hint and withdraw. She, however, only moved closer to her 'Alter Ego,' who answered peevishly in her slow, sleepy drawl that she was engaged just then and didn't want to be disturbed. This was the first and last time I ever sought her of my own accord. Turning my back on her, I called out insolently over my shoulder, in a voice I never would have dared use to my novice mistress, that I promised never to disturb her and her darling again. I returned to Dumas and my wicked ways, while M. de Terves, taking for granted that I had obtained the necessary consent, supplied me with several works from the same author. In some of these quite new paper volumes, I found several pages neatly cut out. Years later, having left the cloister, I re-read Dumas, and discovered that this conscientious young man had deliberately destroyed certain parts he deemed not suitable to my twenty-two years.

Thus I lived through happy hours, till the *Labrador* anchored before Martinique, and M. de Terves' valet went round the ship collecting his master's

belongings, putting thus an end to my halcyon days. At first I did not feel the loss so acutely, for the panorama that unfolded before my entranced gaze, as we entered the Caribbean Sea, gave sufficient compensation. A radiantly blue, cloudless sky reflecting itself in waters of the same deep hue, out of which—like bunches of sweet flowers floating on the surface—rose islands big and small, irregularly scattered about, and covered with such dense tropical vegetation, that the white houses, peeping out from among the many-hued plants and foliage, only served to heighten the wondrous beauty of the whole. In the centre of this fairy scene we stopped to coal, one glorious September morn, and also to take leave of M. de Terves, who had made himself liked by all the officers and first-class passengers; and worshipped by grateful sailors and steerage passengers. As he passed in front of me he nodded, laughed and said sotto-voce:

‘Good-bye, little Sister, and good luck. But don’t be in such a hurry to pronounce those final vows. The world may not be such a naughty, God-forsaken place as your good superiors have taught you to believe.’

I smiled my good-bye and my thanks, then watched him jump nimbly into the boat, where a charmingly pretty and well-dressed woman, some three years my senior, awaited him. To her skirts, clung a lovely boy of four, whose likeness to M. de Terves proclaimed their relationship, and behind her mother—in the arms of a native nurse—an adorable baby girl of eighteen months cooed and

crowed with delight at the sight of a half-forgotten daddy. He radiated with joy at having his little family round him once more, and the sight of their happy faces filled me with envy and dreary heart-ache. I have an idea he mentioned me to his wife and pointed me out to her, as the boat shot over the deep blue waves, for she smilingly waved her handkerchief at me. I returned her greeting through my tears, which—I truly believe—she saw and understood, for even at that distance I noticed the sympathetic look she gave me. And well she might pity me, for her noble, useful, happy life was so much superior to ours—foolish, conceited virgins that we were, exhibiting ourselves in the most fantastic costume, which we called medieval, aesthetic, monastic, and everlastingly shouting to the world at large to come and admire us—the chosen elect of God, the holocausts for the world's sins, the salt of the earth. One day a storm arose—a pantomime storm. Dionysia and Rosette, by far the most pusillanimous among the passengers, beset the captain with anxious inquiries. That kindly, but plain-spoken, gentleman, airing himself on the quarter-deck, pipe in mouth, hands in pockets, told them to get into their berths, and not make fools of themselves. The baby wind fell as quickly and as suddenly as it rose, then our two heroines were loudest to proclaim that they feared nothing from the first—knowing that God would save the ship for the sake of His spouses—its most precious cargo.

But for all we were more than satisfied with ourselves, I secretly nourished an uncomfortable

suspicion that officers and passengers regarded us with surprised and amused contempt. Oft-times I caught them watching us from the corner of a shrewd, merry, twinkling eye, then winking at one another as they shrugged their shoulders.

We had, apart from our own padre, another priest on board, a French curé returning from a visit to his Norman home, back to his small French parish in Caracas. One day he told me in glowing terms of his own 'bonnes sœurs,' who taught the piccaninnies, nursed the sick, gave a home and loving treatment to their fallen sisters, and carried sunshine, hope and tender pity to many a desolate stricken home. I—vainglorious little fool—interrupted him with the bombastic information that Incarnation nuns had no leisure for piccaninnies and drabs, as we recited the Latin big breviary, studied St. Thomas d'Aquin, and pondered deeply over the Fathers.

'Oh you do, do you?' he responded dryly, as he surveyed me up and down with twinkling eye. 'Then you are miles above my poor little "sœur-ettes" who can't read Latin; but can only love God and serve Him in His poor. But then they don't spend the day quarrelling with one another. Possibly they are not intellectual enough for that.'

I squirmed under the lash of this well-deserved snub, and drooped my head in shamed silence. Since M. de Terves' valet had walked off, carrying his master's library with him, time hung heavily on my hands, and I joined my sisters in Christ in their everlasting squabbles and gossips. The Venezuelan priest—a good old boy in the main—cheery and

kindly disposed towards all mankind, regretted the snub administered in public as soon as it had escaped his lips. Remorsefully he patted my shoulder with paternal solicitude, calling me ever after, his own well-beloved little Hroswitha, and submitted knotty theological questions to my great wisdom, which—of course—in spite of my arrogant and ludicrous boasting, I found myself entirely incompetent to unravel. At any rate I forbore to quarrel for the next two days, and coming across a torn volume of Thackeray's masterwork, I returned elated to my hiding-place behind the coil, and wished myself in Becky Sharp's shoes. Then one evening I overheard a conversation not meant for my ears; but I knew it to be as true as M. le Curé's taunt had been merited. Two charming ladies travelled with us. Both had pretty daughters, former day-pupils of the Bordeaux and Cannes Incarnation respectively, so they were naturally on very intimate terms with us. Now, after pacing the deck together, they seated themselves on two chairs placed immediately in front of the coil behind which I hid, and started a desultory conversation, to which I paid not the slightest attention, until ringing peals of laughter coming from the group of purple-clad nuns, young officers and male first-class passengers, made us all lift our heads. Madame de Fontaine remarked to her companion in a low voice:

'The behaviour of these Incarnation ladies is hardly what you expect from holy nuns. I had formed quite another opinion of Our Lord's blessed spouses.'

‘I hadn’t,’ bluntly retorted the more experienced, more plain-spoken Madame Bellamy. ‘Between ourselves, I never had a very exalted opinion of Christ’s spouses. It seems to me all bombastic show and big talk, but little else. Fifteen years ago my youngest sister entered one of these smart, up-to-date religious houses. She came back to us ten months later saying it seemed hardly worth while wearing an outlandish garb and bearing a mystical name to be exactly like other people and not so virtuous as most. She is married now—a most devoted wife and mother, an earnest Christian and an assiduous Churchgoer. But she won’t hear of her daughters being educated by nuns. She always shakes her head and says how that sort of thing will do them no good.’

‘Yet the ladies of the Incarnation are perfectly virtuous and clean-living,’ urged the more lenient Madame de Fontaine.

‘Oh, perfectly, not their bitterest foe dare impugn their virtue—not a breath of scandal tarnishes their good name. Had it been otherwise, I never would have confided my precious Margot to their care. Their only fault is to be exactly like ordinary, everyday folk. Then why this carnival costume—these high sounding names—these mystical titles? Why all this bombastic talk of celestial favours, visions, ecstasies—this arrogant boasting of a mystical union with God? Is He not our God, our Redeemer, our Saviour as well as theirs? Yet to hear them drivel, you would imagine they had made a corner in Divine Persons, leaving nothing over for us poor worms.’

Madame de Fontaine laughed—so did I, with my handkerchief stuffed down my throat. Madame Bellamy continued :

‘ At the time my Margot made her First Communion, she began to talk of giving herself to God. The pretty violet habit and gaudy ceremonies attracted her, as they do all silly girls in their teens. But I would listen to none of that nonsense. “ You can give yourself to God in a pink dress, as well as in a purple one, my Margot—under one name as well as another,” I said to her. “ You try your hardest to grow up a good, honest, Christian woman, as your grandmothers were before you—as your poor mother tries so hard to be, albeit with small success. You can please God, serve your neighbour, save your soul as well, and better that way, than by shutting yourself in a convent, and shouting over the wall to all that pass that you are holier than they—which, nine times out of ten, wouldn’t be true ? ” Well, at first my naughty little puss sulked and cried, saying that I kept her from Jesus, but only the other day she remarked : “ Do you remember, maman, how three years ago, I sat whimpering all day because you would not let me be a nun ? And all the time Madame Jeanne du Sacré Cœur kept assuring me that I was a favoured soul, far more precious to Jesus than the souls of the other little girls in my class. Now I am pleased you were so firm and sensible ; since we have been on deck in close proximity with the nuns, I have ceased to consider religious life so grand and supernatural. Nuns eat, talk, laugh, and flirt just like other women. They quarrel and say nasty

things behind people's backs much more than well-bred women in society are wont to do." I answered, "Well, my Margot, we're all mortal, and have all our faults. Be polite to these ladies and respect them, for they were once your teachers; but I had rather you did not spend too much time in their company." For you will agree with me,' concluded Madame Bellamy, turning to Madame de Fontaine, 'that it is not good for children to hear grown-ups quarrel and say nasty things of one another. I myself can say very nasty things of people I disapprove of; Heavens knows! *I'm* no saint—but never when my chicks are in the room.'

The dinner gong interrupted the good ladies' volubility, and both rose in obedience to the summons, leaving me at liberty to emerge from my hiding-place.

We were not the only Community on board the *Labrador*. With us sailed from Pontailac, a small party of Visitation nuns, bound for Buenos Aires. Six black-garbed female Tom Thumbs, looking so exactly like, that, although I saw them all day and every day for eight weeks, I never could tell one apart from the other. They huddled together in one corner of the deck like new-born chicks, so closely round the Mother Superior as to make her invisible to the naked eye. They sewed, they knitted, they said their beads, and—let me add in justice to them, that for all they were less well dressed, well educated, well born than we Incarnationists, their conduct was far more edifying and in keeping with their religious garb than ours. The contrast between the purple and black garbed

brides of Christ struck onlookers so forcibly, that while officers and passengers alike courteously termed us 'les Dames de l'Incarnation' they spoke of the others partly in contempt, partly in praise as 'Les bonnes petites sœurette de la Visitation.' There were in all seven of these good little sœurette; but until we reached the mainland we believed there were only six. One, a chaste virgin of fifty-seven summers, who had given her pure heart into the celestial Bridegroom's keeping, remained hidden in her cabin, lest the profane eyes of men should behold her charms. During the first thirty days of the journey no one noticed her absence, but one broiling day in September we had just sighted La Guayra, when the captain came thumping up the deck steering straight towards the wobbly black mass in the corner. He apostrophised the mother hen, whose little black head came popping up from the midst of her clacking brood.

'Madame,' he cheerily thundered, 'stewardess tells me that one of your sisters remains cooped up in her state-room even during these dog days. I really cannot allow it. I'm not only absolute monarch on this ship, I am also the father of my children, and responsible to the company for the health and welfare of its passengers. The reverend sister must come up and breathe the fresh air. To stay down there is to court certain fever, and I want no one on the sick list, when we reach Colon. Even with a clean bill of health it is doubtful whether we escape quarantine. Now bring up Ma Sœur this moment, unless she wishes to be fetched by the entire crew.'

The frightened little creature toddled off in obedience to our skipper's orders, and reappeared a moment later, dragging a reluctant black bundle behind her. The Captain bowed chivalrously to this bundle and addressed it, turning his eyes to where he supposed the head to be.

'I regret having disturbed you at your devotions, holy Sister; but must entreat you to remain on deck for the sake of your precious health.'

A squeaky voice issued from the bundle: 'M. le Capitaine, you ask too much of Heaven's bride, to expect her to expose her consecrated person to the coarse gaze of man.'

The honest captain looked bewildered: 'Coarse gaze! man? But surely, Madame, all my first-class passengers are gentlemen.'

'They are all males,' continued the bundle with a shiver of disgust. 'Nor can a cloistered virgin lift her eyes to Heaven without encountering theirs. It is profanation of God's most holy vessels. As to the sailors—they follow me even to the sacred seclusion of my cabin, on pretext of closing the porthole.'

'The men must do their duty, my dear lady; but they can do it without looking at your charming face. Just let me catch one of my rascals lifting his eyes on you, and he will taste the end of that rope. Hé, mauvais garnements!' he roared with well-feigned ferocity at three urchins in their teens, who were coiling a rope hard by. The youngsters grinned sheepishly as they touched their caps to their superior officer, the while he continued in gentler tones:

‘And now, Madame, let me urge you for the sake of your precious health, to unveil and breathe a little fresh air. We are going to have a lovely night, so I should advise you to stay on deck as long as possible.’

With a deep unearthly sigh, she obeyed, disclosing to our view a woman past fifty-five, with a fat scarlet face, small green eyes, a tiny turned-up button of a nose, and a huge mouth. Be it said to the honour of the captain, the little sailor lads, and a group of gentlemen smoking hard by—not one of them moved a muscle of their faces, thus proving themselves gentlemen in very truth—while I, seated under the awning with my breviary on my lap, stuffed my handkerchief down my throat, and began gabbling Complines with a fervour I rarely exhibited in the discharge of my religious duties.

The Captain’s fears of a probable quarantine proved but too well-founded. We had barely sighted Colon, when we beheld the natives making desperate signs at us to keep our distance. Our irate skipper signalled back some very fiery language, which went up in temperature when the sanitary officers came on deck to argue him into a more Christian frame of mind. Two cases of cholera having just been reported from Havre, no French ships could reasonably expect to escape quarantine.

‘But we don’t come from Havre,’ yelled our exasperated sea-lord, as he nimbly danced a ‘pas seul’ on the quarter-deck. ‘Who told you we came from Havre? Is Bordeaux, Havre, do they lie in the same department, nom d’un petit bonhomme?’

'Y como no, Señor,' returned the gentle Spanish-American in that sleepy drawl they all affect. These three small words, 'Y como no,' are ever on the lips of all natives south of the 'Sierra Madre.' Literally they can be translated, 'And why not?' In practice they mean, like the Italian 'altro,' everything under the sun, from the most blood-curdling oath to the tenderest of love's sweet words.

The Captain collapsed from sheer exhaustion, and seated on the quarter-deck rail, with his legs dangling over our heads, wanted to know in tones of forced blandness, what Colon expected him to do with his passengers. 'I must be back in Pontaillac by the end of next month,' he bellowed in dulcet tones. 'They will hardly agree to return with me, and I cannot well drop them overboard.'

'Y como no?' returned the courteous Spaniards, as they prepared to depart, intimating thereby that Colon didn't care a hang what became of 'El Señor Capitan's' passengers. When they were seated in their little boat, which shot swiftly over the blue waters, they again rose and, doffing their hats, cried in chorus, 'Vive la France!'—whether in courtesy or mockery, I cannot say.

Some of our officers saluted in acknowledgement, but our unhappy skipper, still lolling on the rail, examining his boots with brow of thunder, was far too overcome for any exchange of civilities. None dared disturb him, but we looked appalled at one another, as we suddenly realised that the *Labrador* steered due east. At last he called down to us: 'Messieurs, Mesdames, make your choice without delay. Either you return with me to Pontaillac,

or I land you at La Guayra to-morrow evening. Venezuela being in revolution, as usual, they are far too busy cutting one another's throats to trouble about the cholera. You will easily find lodgings at La Guayra and Caracas, until a Spanish or English ship picks you up, to take you back to Colon.

All the secular passengers took the Captain's decision quietly enough and assembled in small knots to discuss it. But the entire black-garbed community, and I blush to add—Rosa Mystica, Dionysia and Rosetta of our lot, started a dismal howl, at the mention of revolution and throat-cutting. The Visitation sister who had kept her loveliness so carefully veiled from the eyes of man, forgot her modesty in her fright, and rushing up the ladder with habit grotesquely ballooning behind, nearly tumbled on the breast of a modestly blushing skipper, imploring him to protect her from the savages who would cut her throat.

'And why not, Madame? Why should you object to murder?' queried this sorely tried gentleman. 'Isn't it the quickest road to Heaven, and oughtn't you to long to dwell among your sisters, the angels—instead of coarse man?'

But the good lady did not see things from this point of view, and kept us awake all night with her moans, as did some of our own sisters. It is a fact I noticed continually, which oft-times puzzled me, during my five years' sojourn amid God's most favoured saints. The nuns feared death a thousand times more than I have ever known it feared by the least pious secular person of my acquaintance.

They jabbered incessantly of their Celestial Bridegroom, of the Communion of Saints to which one day they would belong. But at the mere mention of death—that door that was to lead them from all they hated and despised, to all they yearned and longed for—they screamed with fear and dismay, and blanched at the thought of that dread agony that awaits us all—sinners and saints alike.

CHAPTER II

So we returned to La Guayra, where those sweet-tempered, childlike rebels received us with open arms. The opposition party held the coast and seaport that day, while the President Hernandez and his adherents kept tight hold of Caracas. The harbour, the streets, the whole countryside swarmed with ferocious, swarthy, red-eyed savages, whose infantile guileless nature belied their looks, clad in white linen trousers none too clean, many-hued handkerchiefs knotted round their heads—and nothing else save a most murderous looking instrument, half knife, half chopper, the sight of which caused you to lift your hand to your neck now and again in fear and trembling. This primitive attire represented their entire uniform, even when on parade. The moment they caught sight of our religious garb, they swarmed round us, thrusting their filthy paws into our faces, screaming the while : ‘Una estampita, madre, una medallita por el amor di Dios.’

We distributed medals, pictures, Agnus Dei, among them, and to watch their babyish ecstasies of joy made you think of infants unpacking their Christmas stockings. While we wandered about

the place, Padre Padilla went in search of the parish priest, and soon returned with the information that the 'Hermanas de la Misericordia' offered shelter to one community, while the other would find a kind welcome at a country house situated in the little village of Maïquitia, some few miles distant, the owner of which—a widowed lady—was going to México to spend a few months with relatives, at the end of the week.

'The Visitation nuns shall go to the Convento,' whispered Padre in our ears with a knowing wink. 'I have retained the farmhouse for you, where you will enjoy a far greater liberty, as the owner sails for Mexico on Friday.'

We heartily agreed with our astute little chaplain, and having hustled the frightened, squeaky little Visitation nuns into the Convento, we hastened to the station, and took the train for Maïquitia, accomplishing the twelve English miles in something under five hours.

I call the vehicle that transported us inland a train—by courtesy only. In reality it might be more aptly compared to a very cumbersome, very antiquated Noah's ark, and so cautiously did it feel its way along the rails, that several European and American gentlemen travelling with us continually alighted, walking leisurely at our side chatting, or threw themselves on the grass for a short siesta, to rejoin us farther on and climb back into the window as the fancy took them. One young Bostonian told us that no South American train hurried itself, not unreasonably conjecturing that it was bound to arrive at its destination sooner or later. He

illustrated this bit of information with a story which surely deserves a place in *Punch*.

Some Washingtonians, friends of his, went picnicking in the wilds of Honduras. Late that evening, when the train put them down at their station, they noticed with a momentary regret that an half-empty lunch-basket had been left behind. The trivial incident forgotten, they prepared to leave the station, when they beheld the train from which they had only just alighted slowly steaming back to them, while a grinning porter waved the lost basket at them.

‘You left your basket behind, Señors,’ cried this gallant official, ‘so I told the engine-driver to turn back, as you may need the cakes for your supper.’

Fancy the English Great Central treating its passengers with such extravagant courtesy!

In Maïquitia, a picturesque little Indian village, we found a miserable hovel awaiting us. The kind owner of this palatial dwelling, after making us as comfortable as circumstances allowed, took her departure a couple of days later, leaving us to our own resources which, I may add to the honour of my Order, were always inexhaustible. We certainly knew how to take care of and entertain ourselves, whatever else we did not know. We spent the next ten days roaming in the virgin forests and through the narrow streets of the quaint little village. We also spent some hours each day in the church, where I vainly tried to pray with tight closed eyes, not daring to open them, for fear of suffering from chronic nightmare ever after. Before me stood, on our Lady’s altar, a huge, appallingly ugly, wooden

doll, painted in glaring colours. It was robed in a grass-green poplin trimmed with jet beads, and crookedly falling over a tremendous crinoline. A magenta bonnet sat awry on its frowsy head, and in its hand it held what at first I believed to be a half-boiled lobster vainly trying to elude its grasp. I discovered in time that it represented the Infant Jesus blessing the multitudes.

During our sojourn at Maïquitia, Mère Rosa Mystica, using her prerogative, determined to go and enjoy a day's outing in Caracas. Of course she chose her adored Rosette as companion, much to the dissatisfaction of the other professed nuns. Already a good deal of discontent had manifested itself among us from the time we left Santander. To see the Superior, who rightly belonged to all, completely monopolised by the youngest choir-sister, myself excepted, who did not count, naturally infuriated Kathinka, Adelaïde, and Dionysia. On the morning they beheld Rosa Mystica and Rosette equipped for the Caracas outing in answer to an invitation to dine with the bishop, it seemed that the revolution raging all round us was about to enter our sacred precincts, when Fate intervened, and Rosette, slipping on a banana peel, hurt her foot so badly as to necessitate her lying down for the next four or five days. Mère Rosa Mystica's look of annoyance was comical to behold. She hastily resolved to wire to the episcopal palace, when Dionysia sardonically reminded her that the rebels had cut the wires. To stay away without previous warning, after the bishop had promised to send his own trap to the station, could not be thought of, so

making a virtue of necessity, she invited Sœur Adelaïde to join her, which delighted us all, for everybody loved the dear, witty, old Yorkshire lady.

Our principal occupation during our Maïquitia days consisted in watching those swartthy rebels, to whom the many-coloured handkerchiefs knotted round their heads gave a most ferocious aspect. Their appearance was the worst part about them; for the rest, no more childlike, tender-hearted, inoffensive creatures could well be imagined. To see them leaning against our 'patio' door, asking how we had slept, whether we liked our food, confessing their sins to our padre at the top of their voices, giving us the latest néws of poor old Hernandez, apparently on his last legs, was a sight well worth a short quarantine. One day, however, they showed themselves less inoffensive. Finding at the station some trunks belonging to our *Labrador* passengers, they broke them open, scattering the contents to all winds. Then arrayed in ladies' underwear, nuns' habits, and other finery, they paraded the streets, even pushing their audacity in soliciting our admiration, and entreating to be admitted to our Order. Some of our passengers lost quite a hundred pounds' worth of goods on that fatal day. They repeatedly called on the Venezuelan Government for compensation, but I fear they received many honeyed words in the place of the 'duros' they claimed.

On the fourth of October, the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, the annual downpour began, and lasted without a break during the entire octave. It is called 'Il cordeliere di San Francisco' and with

good cause, for the rain falls—not in drops, however large—but in one huge never-ending rope of prodigious thickness. For eight days we led an amphibious existence, the wonder being that we ever got dry again. The deluge, however, had the one advantage of ridding us of the too tender-hearted Maïquitians, who overflowed with the milk of human kindness—these loving, lovable creatures, who would wake up at three o'clock in the morning to make anxious inquiries concerning our night's rest, who brought us loads of food and delicious fruit, who sought in every way to please and serve us. They poured in at all hours, their lace mantillas over their heads, their fans slowly jerking to and fro and languidly sinking into the best swing-chairs of our 'patio,' to the disgust of Nuestra Madre, who was partial to comfortable swing-chairs herself, expected us to make conversation for them—their sole contribution to the entertainment being a languid 'Y como no?' drawled out at regular intervals. Some brought their babies, who in Maïquitia are all dressed alike, a tiny muslin jacket trimmed with many-coloured ribbons, and reaching exactly to the waist but not an inch farther, leaving the remainder of the body uncovered, to the scandal of my sainted sisters. One afternoon, Sœur Dionysia took a six-months-old gentleman on her lap, modestly covering the plump brown legs with a big white shawl. For hours the mother sat on, her 'Como nos' growing drowsier and drowsier, while the babe slept. Suddenly a blood-curdling yell rose to the cloudless sky, while on Dionysia's lap the infant writhed as in the last

death throes. Vainly the mother sought to calm it, nothing remained but for her to take it home. After the door closed behind her, we learned that Dionysia had been pinching the poor kiddy's legs under cover of the shawl, hoping by means of this barbaric act to rid us of the mother. Indignantly we remaining eight upbraided her for her cruelty. She defended herself with spirit, pleading that she only acted in self-defence. Another drawled 'Como no' would have sent her, instead of the baby, into writhing convulsions. She counted no fewer than fifty-six in one hour.*

Priests also came, but as they brought no babies for Dionysia to pinch, we were compelled to bear with them to the bitter end. I have often read and heard that the Spanish American priesthood is a sorry lot. Those we met at Maïquitia, and later on in Leon, were innocent and guileless enough—too innocent in many respects. Their education would have shamed a council-school child in this country. Even in the subjects pertaining to their sacred profession they appeared woefully ignorant. They could repeat their catechism parrot-like, from end to end, and gabble through the Latin breviary, of which they understood never a word. One day a dear curly-headed youngster of two or three and twenty sat in our 'patio' for many dreary hours, blushing scarlet up to his tonsure each time he lifted his eyes and encountered the calm gaze of the nuns seated around him, of whom all, myself excepted, were nearly old enough to have been his mother. At last he started a desultory story about some European

regular priest which seemed to have no point. The nuns gently urged him on, till he came to a dead stop, trying vainly to remember to what Order the said monk belonged. We none of us wanted to know and gazed hopelessly at each other, while he repeatedly stuttered: 'To the Order . . . to the Order . . .,' and the perspiration ran down his innocent forehead. At last Sœur Adelaïde, always a bit of a wag, and hoping to hasten his departure as well as our dinner, gently interpolated: 'Possibly he belonged to the order of Melchisedec, Padre!' 'Y como no?' answered the grateful orator, and his relief was so intense that we took advantage of it to hustle him off the premises. Then Notre Mère turned to scold, but the episode—like that of the pinched baby—ended in screams of gargantuan laughter.

Then arrived from La Guayra the welcome news that a Spanish ship awaited us. The entire population—clergy, rebels, doñas, babies—all in floods of tears, accompanied us to the station. The same amicable train lugged us back to Colon, the engine-driver leaving his furnace every now and then to poke his grimy, grinning face into our carriage window with the request for 'Una estam-pita, madre!'

The few days spent on the Spanish ship passed quickly and unpleasantly, as the October gale kept us chained to our berths in the throes of sea-sickness. At Colon we took the train for Panama and passed slowly, very slowly, through scenery of most exquisite loveliness, but rendered mournful by the sight of Lesseps' unfinished canal

and the many graves bordering the virgin forest on both sides. Tiny little colibris, or what we call humming-birds, darted in and out of the dense foliage, looking for all the world like winged diamonds of many hues.

At Panama, we stayed ten days with the Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, during which time our behaviour was more in keeping with our sacred character than it had been before or since, for the shocked, grieved looks of our white-capped hostesses, each time we kicked over the traces, filled us with salutary shame.

Of the sisters themselves I have nothing but good to say. Their picturesque costume, so often seen in the neighbourhood of Victoria Station and Westminster, is too well known to need description. They rose at five, heard Mass, said their morning prayers, and for the remainder of the twenty-four hours sought God in the person of his poor. They taught piccaninnies, gave them their midday soup, fed the aged, nursed the sick, visited the filthiest hovels, and did the most repulsive work with a smile on their calm, happy faces. For ecstasies, visions, Latin office, gorgeous ceremonies, they had neither time nor money. They did not call themselves the brides of Jesus, but the servants of the poor. One day during the recreation, Mère Rosa Mystica asked the Sister Superior for information concerning the Panama Smart Set (we Incarnationists had no dealings with any other set), to which the simple soul naïvely answered, that she had hardly seen a decently dressed individual during the thirty years of her superiorship in Panama. The rich

did not appear to know their way to the Convento de la Caridad. On the other hand, she was on most intimate terms with every pauper, beggar, drunkard, and discharged prisoner within the ten-mile radius.

CHAPTER III

ON board the *Washington*, an American ship from New York, we breathed freely once more. The sight of those ingenuous simple souls who could not say the Latin breviary, did not hob-nob with Royal and titled folk, never quarrelled, never said nasty things of one another, and spent their days mothering unwashed brats, while we despised them, yet gave us an uncomfortable feeling we preferred not to analyse. Joyfully we bade them good-bye, and returned to Colon, feeling much like children let out of school. Rosa Mystica and Rosetta sought each other's beloved company. Adelaïde reverted to her grandmotherly duties toward our young padre. I, who, to my intense joy, found some of Mark Twain's novels in my cabin, revelled in the adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, while the remainder of our sainted community (Salvador and Raymonda excepted) found relaxation in the cheery company of young officers and American passengers. Sœur Kathinka in particular, and not unnaturally, radiated joy at finding herself among Yankees once more. Her joy was but short-lived, our long journey now approached its end, and one

evening we sighted Nicaraguan shores, and stood gazing—not without a certain emotion, at the land where we might possibly terminate our days.

'Sœur Dionysia,' I whispered in her ear, as I stood beside her on the darkening deck amid a laughing, chattering throng, 'Sœur Dionysia, do you recall that first night in the train, when it stopped at Vaugliard, you jumped up, pretending we had arrived at Leon. It happened exactly eight weeks ago this very hour. Well! we have arrived. Look up and greet the land where you will one day leave your bones.'

Jovial, buxom Dionysia, gave a fat laugh, as she retorted, 'Not my bones, those I intend to bequeath to "Ma belle France." But Nicaragua may have as much of my fat as it likes to rid me of, and I trust that will be several stones.'

We landed at Corinto, and were greeted by some charming people, in whose fourteen-year-old daughter Raphaëla we welcomed our first pupil. It would be difficult to imagine anything more hospitable, more affectionate, kindlier, than these lovable, guileless, childlike Spanish-Americans. Their sleepy drawl, their slow movements, their parrot-like repetition of the eternal 'Como no,' their monotonous waving of fans and balancing in swing-chairs, made us laugh even unto tears, when their backs were turned.

The evening train, similar in all points to the Venezuelan antediluvian coach, took us slowly but surely to our final destination, Leon, the second most important town of the republic, which might

have ranked as a fourth-rate Welsh hamlet in this country. Darkness enveloped land and sea, when we halted at a species of wooden barracks. In spite of the lateness of the hour, the place swarmed with dark figures fantastically illuminated by smoky torches. We immediately grasped the situation. The whole population had turned out 'en masse,' to lead us in triumph to our new convent and instal us therein. Hysterically pinching and urging one another not to laugh, we alighted, to be received with open arms by the 'Junta' and his wife, which consisted of twenty-four ladies and gentlemen of dignified appearance, irreproachable in dress, manners and morals, who represented—for that day at least—the Government of Nicaragua under its equally ephemeral president. We had not time to return their kindly greetings when the disorderly procession closed around us, nearly carrying us off our feet, and occasionally setting fire to our veils with their smelly, smoky torches. Thus hemmed in, fairly suffocated by the heat and deafened by the shrieks of welcome, we proceeded at the rate of thirty yards an hour.

At the door of our new home the unwashed mob got pitilessly turned aside; only the select few, to the number of some two or three hundred, followed us inside, and with childish glee pointed out to us the manifold beauties and advantages of our dwelling, completely ignoring the disadvantages, which—by the way—needed no pointing out, they were quite glaring enough to be seen without glasses. The twelve strokes of midnight had long since

died away before we were permitted to seek our none too comfortable couches.

The next morning, I rose full of good resolutions. The wearisome journey over, with its manifold temptations in the guise of other people's novels, I would find my days fully occupied with teaching, and looked forward to the arrival of our children as the best means to my salvation. Alas! alas! I counted without my host, and had yet to learn that although Mère Rosa Mystica had no will inside the Community, she meant to rule supreme over the luckless 'Junta.' We arrived in the beginning of November; the Easter celebrations were concluded before we opened our doors to our pupils.

Honeyed words, fair promises, endless presents for larder and pantry are all very well in their way; but hard 'duros' are infinitely better, or so at least thought our lanky mystical Rose, who now opened the campaign with her twelve foes and their wives. All the pitched battles took place in the front 'patio.' Mère Mystica seated in her swing-chair, with Sœur Rosette as bottleholder by her side, and the twenty-four male and female representatives of the Republic ranged stiff and solemn around her, was a sight to rejoice the most dyspeptic individual.

The wearisome days passed slowly on. Dionysia, Kathinka, Adelaïde, and Placidie relegated to the back 'patio,' fumed and fretted, while I wandered about from room to room, and finally grew so depressed as to sit crying for hours in my cell. The arrival of a tremendous cargo of

educational books brought alleviation to my misery. Mère Rosa Mystica called me to her room, spoke to me nearly for the first time since we made each other's acquaintance at Neuilly, and handing me a pile of books, bade me study the Spanish language, as well as the history and geography of Central America with great zest, as Spanish-speaking teachers would be sorely needed when school began. Rosette, though a Spaniard, did not like teaching; she preferred to interview seculars in the parlour; Sœur Adelaïde, who had been at the Malaga Incarnation for nearly fifteen years, could speak the language fairly well, but she was getting old, and could not exert herself—particularly in the hot climate, while Dionysia and Kathinka could say nothing but 'Quien sabe?' and 'Como no' till the day they sailed back to Europe. I, being young and fresh from school, Mère Rosa meant to get as much as she could out of me, and I but too joyfully acquiesced. From that moment my days were pleasantly filled with the study of Central American history, which is intensely interesting.

Attached to our house, which had once been the priest's seminary, was a fair-sized chapel, where I oft-times went to pray. I could have performed my devotions better kneeling in the centre of Madame Tussaud's on Bank Holiday. Saints, male and female, wooden dolls grotesquely painted, hideously robed, surrounded me on all sides. The males wore frock coats and knee breeches, and many of them sported side whiskers. The females simpered inside early Victorian bonnets. They

wore huge crinolines, corkscrew curls, and carried fans. Their clothes were filthily dirty, moth-eaten, torn and ragged. A more disreputable company of saints it would be difficult to find. They might have spent the night brawling in a pot-house, to judge by their appearance. Later, when Notre Mère remained victorious in her quarrels with the 'Junta' and a better house was assigned to us, we cleared away the equally hideous statuary of our new chapel, and decorated it more in accordance with our own chastened, more æsthetic tastes.

During recreation hours I left my books to join the rest of the community in the front 'patio.' But even at such moments the kindly Nicaraguan ladies pursued us. It is difficult to understand how they managed to exist prior to our arrival, now we were in their midst they could hardly bear to lose sight of us. One, the dearest old soul to be found in the new world or the old either, Doña Cupertina by name, ruled us with a rod of iron, and in her capacity of aunt to a dead and gone president, and great-aunt to a potential one, considered it her prerogative to manage us, our house, our souls, our health. Woe betide us if we did not swallow her concoctions, observe to the letter her rules of hygiene, which by the way we never did, once her back was turned. She loaded us with presents, sweetmeats, good advice. We took the first two items, and pretended to take the last, which did just as well. She drove Rosa and Rosette picnicking all over the country. Sometimes Adelaïde, Kathinka, and Dionysia joined in these excursions, for their barely veiled discontent,

began to frighten Rosa Mystica, who feared, not without good reason—that they might write to Neuilly and complain of their Superior's somewhat uncanonical behaviour. I then remained behind with the lay-sisters, much to poor Placidie's distress and anger. At such times she would go round sobbing into every sympathetic ear that she really had been meant for a choir-sister, and Salvador and I had much trouble in comforting her. I, too, envied my seniors on such occasions, for I should dearly have loved to visit the old Indian ruins and Aztec temples.

With the end of February, the sound of squabbling issuing from the front 'patio' grew fainter each day, and finally ceased completely, when we enjoyed the unwonted sight of Rosa Mystica, Rosette, the 'Junta, and the 'Junta's' twelve wives all wreathed in smiles and united in the bonds of holy friendship. They had evidently arrived at some compromise, or rather I imagine that the wily Rosa Mystica had proved one too many for the guileless Nicaraguan Republic, as she got her own way all along the line.

A few days later we emigrated into a more luxurious, more spacious, better built house, and then a busy time began. Workmen being unavailable, some thirty convicts dragging a tiny bullet attached to their right feet were let loose upon us. Merry, light-hearted, easy-going youngsters who worked when the fancy took them—and it took them rarely—then seated themselves for a gossip with any 'madre' willing and ready to entertain them.

'What have you done?' we asked each one in turn, as we pointed to the sinister bullet.

'Matado un hombre,' came the invariable drawl, accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders.

'But why did you kill him?' we persisted in tones of horror.

Another shrug, a vague movement of the hands, and a drawled 'No le quizo!' ('I didn't like him.')

Two warders, as amiable and easy-going as their prisoners, stood—or rather slept on guard at the front door. I awoke them with the gratuitous information that we hanged our murderers in England. Why didn't the Nicaraguan Republic treat her assassins with equal severity?

The warder gave the yawning explanation: 'The poor boys didn't like being hanged. They preferred to live.'

'But our murderers don't take kindly to the gallows either,' I argued. 'We usually hang them without troubling to obtain their consent.'

The warder only shook his head and repeated that his 'muchachos' preferred to live, so that they might work for the pretty 'madres.'

CHAPTER IV

At last they arrived, all jabbering and chattering together, over one hundred and fifty of them—dear warm-hearted little maids of Nicaragua! The eldest not quite sixteen, the youngest not quite three, they came to us with open arms, only asking to love and to be loved. They didn't take kindly to their lessons, and said so without false shame. When we tried scolding, they silenced us with their soft coaxing ways and their cooing: 'Y como no, madrecita!' When we sought to enforce European rules and regulations, they smiled indulgently at the erratic ways of those funny French 'madres,' and finally taught us more than they ever learnt from us. By the following autumn, I could jabber away at their Nicaraguan dialect, as if I had spoken naught else from birth. They also—like Doña Cupertina—considered it their duty to watch over our constitutions and give us hygienic advice, which mostly proved very good and sound. I have seen tots aged five gravely shaking their heads at Mère Rose Mystica aged forty-five, when this lackadaisical lady sat in the sunlit 'patio,' too lazy to place on her languid head the broad panama we

usually wore stuck jauntily atop our woollen veils. •

Order, discipline, quiet, we never succeeded in establishing. Mère Mystica was too vacillating, too weak, too indolent, too completely overruled and subjugated by Rosette, to assert her authority. Rosette had established herself Superior in all but name, yet as none of us—Rose Mystica excepted—obeyed her, anarchy reigned supreme. The children, while they loved us, frantically worshipped the pretty, almond-eyed little Cuban; their passionate affection being naturally her trump card in the management or mismanagement of this unique house of education. Very soon our one and a half hundred little monkeys discovered that, by giving her presents, worshipping and flattering her, they could obtain holidays, treats, remittances from lessons and punishments, which the rest of us were powerless to grant. If a naughty or lazy child—they were all naughty and lazy, the darlings; but we loved them none the less for that—received a well-deserved punishment from some other teacher, she ran whimpering to Rosette, who comforted the delinquent with sweeties from the larder, and cancelled the punishment. The nun, whose authority had thus been set at naught, ran fuming to Notre Mère, usually to be found lolling in the ‘patio’ deep in desultory conversation with Cupertina. Our local representative of Jesus Christ on earth, shrugged her shoulders in helpless perplexity, and soon it became apparent to all that she began to wince under the rod she prepared for her own back. Rosette,

who shared her bedroom and occupied first place at choir and refectory, was ever at her side, sulked and went into tantrums each time the luckless Superior dared to differ with her on any subject under the sun.

When we first arrived at Leon, the choir-nuns drew lots for their places, as is customary at the Incarnation. I assisted at the ceremony, though being a novice, took no part in it, nor did the three lay-sisters, who joined our circle, while the ceremony took place amid much laughter and good-humoured banter. The four sisters wrote their names on small bits of paper, which they twisted and threw in a basket placed on Notre Mère's lap. Under cover of the merry noise, Rosette looked meaningly at Notre Mère, then marked the corner of her paper with a tiny cross, forgetting that I stood close behind her chair. When the papers lay in the basket, Mystica, pretending to shut her eyes, drew out each piece one by one. Rosette's paper marked with the cross came first, as I knew it would, and from that day forward she was ever at the Superior's side. At the following recreation I made a veiled allusion to the fraud, which the other sisters did not understand, as I never meant they should. But Rosa and Rosette understood that they had been watched, and loved me none the better after that. Well, this edifying incident took place in November, and in April it had become quite evident to the most superficial onlooker that Rosa had tired of her fidus Achates. Surreptitiously she tried to bring Sœur Kathinka more and more to the foreground,

till at last in despair she wrote to Neuilly, taking good care that her secretary should not see the letter, and implored help. Help came in the form of an order issued by the Neuilly 'Grand Conseil' that Sœur Kathinka de l'Eternité was to be acknowledged assistant and second in command of the new foundation. The choice proved an excellent one, Sœur Kathinka, apart from her harmless little peculiarities, was a charming woman of thirty-five or thereabouts, who, though she never succeeded in mastering even the rudiments of the Spanish language, was the only one who kept some semblance of order among our unruly hundred and fifty.

For if our children loved us, they neither respected nor obeyed us—except, as I have just said, Sœur Kathinka a little, a very little. Before our arrival they all attended the schools of the Saint Vincent de Paul sisters, sitting side by side with the poorest Indians. One day, when the first division had been exceptionally rampageous with the hot-tempered Madre Dionysia, I met them at the class-room door to fetch them for the three o'clock recreation. We walked round and round the 'patio,' it having been found impossible to enforce games and general conversation, as in European houses. They swarmed round me, all talking at once.

'Were you as naughty and lazy with the "Hermanas de la Caridad" as you are with us?' I queried during a momentary lull.

They shook their heads as several answered ingenuously: 'Y como no! At the Caridad

Convento we had to be obedient, studious and orderly. The Hermanas just made us.' .

'But how did they make you?'

'Quien sabe?' came the vague response. 'They did nothing particular. They were just holy and good. Oh, very, very good!'

This was not pleasant hearing, and I squirmed as I tacitly acknowledged the truth of what it implied. Testily I retorted:

'Who are you, you silly babes, to judge of a nun's holiness?'

'Don't be cross, madrecita,' they cooed, the entire forty hanging on my two arms like thick clusters of grapes. 'The Hermanas were santas, muy santas; but we love you best. You are smarter, prettier, more amusing. The Hermanas were holy, bah! only holy, nothing else. Not a bit funny or smart!'

'From the lips of babes and sucklings . . .,' thought I, and wisely changed an awkward subject.

We could not have gorgeous ceremonies like those at Neuilly; it was not to be expected. But Sœur Rosette's clever, artistic little fingers kept the altar charmingly decorated, while the rest of us, with Adelaïde as organist and Kathinka as soloist, delighted our children's ears with pretty French and Latin canticles. After a time we also gave the Child of Mary ribbon to three or four of the least turbulent, as an incentive to the remaining one hundred and forty-six to deserve it. The colour-loving little monkeys were delighted with the pretty pale blue decoration, for the rest the duties of the association sat but lightly on their

shoulders. For one thing they emphatically refused to police their school-mates. Be it said to their honour, they never could be brought to understand that tale-bearing and spying were virtues, not vices. Moreover, as far as I could see, the population of the entire Central Americas appear to form one family. All the hundred and fifty pupils claimed each other for cousins, and all presidents and 'Juntas' past, present, and future as grandfathers, fathers, uncles, or godparents, while Cupertina was known as 'Tia' Cupertina from Tehuantepec to Golfo Dulce, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

We gave our pupils many holidays; what we did not give them, they took, in that whole-hearted, amiable fashion peculiar to them. Our greatest feast we celebrated on the eighth of December, the date of the 'Virgen's Immaculada Concepcion.' Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide, were minor feasts of no importance compared to that one. The natives donned their festive apparel before dawn, in order to start proceedings without unnecessary delay. One continual never-ending procession, to the sound of what appeared to be kettle-drumming, constituted the principal feature of the solemnities. The night these worthy Christians made unholy by bonfires, rockets, fireworks intermingling with a bacchanalian uproar which lasted till dawn. These edifying devotions continued without a break till 11.59 P.M. of the 15th, the day of the octave. Inside the convent wall our amiable one and a half hundred imitated their elders as far as their more restricted

liberty would allow. They gobbled sweets incessantly for eight consecutive days. When we coaxingly hinted at lessons, they looked as horrified as if we had ordered them to commit a mortal sin of the most infamous, unspeakable kind. They made bonfires behind the doors, let off fireworks from under their sheets, and finally set fire to three sides of the 'patio.'

Another exciting moment of our lives occurred at each earthquake. We usually managed to put in two or three a week. Every now and then we felt a rumbling vibration similar to that felt by people living over an underground railway. Then the whole unruly band jumped up in wild ecstasies of delight, and yelling 'terraemotus, terraemotus, madre!' stampeded to the centre of the 'patio.' After a time I became suspicious of these terrestrial upheavings, as I cannot recall that they occasioned so much as the upsetting of a flowerpot or a rickety chair during my eighteen months' sojourn in the tropics. Growing more sceptical as time passed, I finally threatened dire punishment to the one who started the cry. But the other sisters did not share my optimistic views concerning these terrific upheavals. Sœur Adelaïde and Sœur Dionysia, in particular, went nearly off their heads with terror at the sole mention of that one dread word. Also it happened more than once, that when the lesson of one or the other grew especially dull and tedious, some wag started the alarm. Then followed the rush, headed by Adelaïde and Dionysia, in spite of the former's fifty-seven years and the latter's ever-increasing fat. Perspiring and

breathless, they sank into the middle of the 'patio,' only to discover that they had been diddled by some chick not yet in her teens.

A year had elapsed since our arrival on Nicaraguan shores. We were beginning to take kindly to the heat and the food, the obstreperous 'Junta' and smiling doñas. The children and we were getting used to one another's little ways; in one word, we were shaking down in our new home, when all the horrors of a bloody revolution came to alleviate the monotony of our life and fill it with joyful excitement. Our lessons, what there were of them, were stopped, while ferocious, wild-eyed revolutionists sprang in at our windows to cower whimpering behind our skirts or under our beds. Shaking with laughter, we dragged them out by the legs and thrust them back on to the caked mud, termed pavement in Leon, while we heartlessly turned a deaf ear to their piteous cries: 'Madre, Madre! hide us, save us, or we shall be shot!'

What perplexed us most, while it sent us into fits of inextinguishable laughter, was the pusillanimity shown by both sides. The President's troops were as frightened of the rebels as the rebels were of them. Oft-times we had representatives of both parties hiding under the same bed. 'Who remained to do the fighting,' we asked Doña Cupertina, 'while the rest hid?' To which that lady lucidly answered: 'Quien sabe? If they didn't hide, they might get shot.'

Certainly a little desultory popping of guns, going off in a haphazard sort of way, occasionally

reached our ears. But it sounded far less formidable than the shooting that kept us awake during the 'Immaculada' octave. Hardly a single casualty ever got reported on either side, they took far too much care of their skins for that.*

Yet, in spite of this extreme prudence, one of them managed to get a little small shot in his shoulder, and ran whimpering to show us his flowing gore. His dismal bellows finally touched our womanly hearts, we could not bring ourselves to throw him back bleeding into the scorched streets. So turning an outhouse into a temporary bedroom, we popped our slobbering six-foot-high piece of manhood into it, and bade an old native negress go and nurse him. So greatly did he enjoy the unwonted luxury of clean sheets and succulent food, that he refused to be cured, until we sent in two of Doña Cupertina's grown-up nephews armed with sticks. The youngsters belaboured him soundly, and, dragging the lazy scamp out of bed, forced him to don his rags and appear in the 'patio,' where Mère Rosa Mystica waited to speak to him. She told him in her kindly, languid drawl, that he might stay in the outhouse and receive two good meals a day, if he chose to make himself useful about the place. We needed an odd man to do the rough work, run errands and draw water; so Juan might have first trial, and stay if he proved satisfactory. At the mention of two good meals our Juan grinned ecstatically. When Nuestra Madre began talking of rough work, he stared with wooden countenance up to the cloudless skies. He then received immediate orders to go and draw ten buckets for

Sor Raymonda, our little cook. He drew exactly half a pint, and a few minutes later Mère Mystica found him lying at her door piteously begging for 'pan dulce,' a sort of fancy bread, greatly favoured by the indigents who cannot afford to buy it. We bore with him for eight days, getting him to work in a spasmodic sort of way by the promise of a piece of 'pan dulce,' the size of which to be regulated by the amount of work he produced. Only when he got caught, red-handed at Managua wearing our pupils' underlinen, which Sœur Rosette had sent him to fetch from the laundress, did Mère Mystica's admirable phlegm desert her, and she handed him over to the police. They birched him much in the way they birch small boys in this country, during which performance he blubbered like a five-year-old baby girl.

The bloodthirsty revolution, in which the flowing gore of our illustrious Juan seems to have been the chief and only casualty worth reporting, came to an abrupt and merry end. We hoisted a new president on to the presidential chair at Managua, we sent the old one grinning and delighted over the duck pond, to put in a high old time in Paris and London.

It was then decided by the 'Junta' and the doñas assembled round Rosa Mystica's swing-chair in the front 'patio,' that we all needed a prolonged rest. The children must rest from the lessons they never learnt, and go home for an eight weeks' holiday. They hung weeping round our necks, as if they were never to see us more. It is something to remember that we taught them to love us, if

we taught them nothing else, and that—if they had no very exalted opinion of our sanctity, at least they found the way to our hearts.

Then we began to think of ourselves—an item we rarely left to the last,—and advised by our countless patrons, we determined to emigrate to the shores of the Pacific, and there for two delicious months to dwell under leafy tents. ‘With us went doñas ‘en masse,’ also priests, brothers of priests—youngsters under twenty-five who spent the whole day picnicking with us, to be ordered at nightfall to their own quarters, some two miles distant from ours, Nuestra Madre having distinctly refused to allow for a smaller distance.

We travelled for ten miles in covered vans drawn by oxen, similar to those cumbersome vehicles in which the ‘Merovingian rois fainéants’ of the seventh century are supposed to have taken their airings. We set out at two o’clock in the morning, to arrive at eleven o’clock at night. Three horses being available, Mère Mystica rode with the gentlemen, the second horse fell to Sœur Kathinka, who had first right as assistant, and the third had to be granted to Rosette, for although the violent-tempered little Cuban’s power was now very much on the wane, thanks to some threatening letters from Neuilly, still she remained a personage to be considered. She still held the exalted position of ‘toquade’ to the whole school, she still swayed Mère Rosa Mystica—if in a lesser degree—yet in memory of their mutual love for that Iberian-Caledonian individual they called ‘Nuestra Madre Celeste,’ whom I only saw once. Each time

Mère Mystica screwed up sufficient courage to thwart Rosette, that practical young lady revenged herself by fasting for many days, or by sitting at nightfall on the ground of the rain-drenched 'patio,' though visitors and children constantly warned her that it meant nearly certain death. On such occasions poor Mystica, fearful of losing the one kindred soul with whom she could talk of her lost love, left behind in distant Madrid, sued for peace, and obtained it after much coaxing.

I will say nothing of our open-air life, which was delicious beyond words. The life we led on the ship began again to a certain extent. The padres, madres, and doñas sat together, laughing, joking, sometimes squabbling—at least the European virgins did the latter; natives are too lymphatic to nurse differences of opinion. I wandered through virgin forests and o'er wild ocean cliffs, and was happier than I had ever been before.

We took with us three of the oldest and richest girls, whose parents paid for the entire expedition. It was a foregone resolve of Mère Mystica's to keep no child in the school who could not pay the fees, and to allow none to remain during the holidays who could not pay the extra holiday fees. One there was in their number who needed such shelter as the convent alone could afford, with dire need. Poor little Javiera! poor lovely little Javiera! The loveliest girl in Central America, the rose of Managua, as she was called. She had no mother to watch over her, only a father—a sea-captain always away with his ship, and a dotty, half-deaf, half-blind old grandam. Men swarmed round

the rose of Managua, as bees round a pot of honey. Doña Cupertina, for all she may have been an interfering old bore, could claim to be the most sensible individual in the five Republics, warned Rosa Mystica with grave words. Javiera must be kept in the convent, surrounded by mature women, who could guard her night and day.

The sea-captain, consulted on the point, sent word from Cape Colony that he could not afford the extra fees; already the education his two pretty little daughters were receiving made a big hole in his not too ample income. But if the Reverend Mother would act a mother's part toward his motherless girl, he would ever be grateful. Rosa, however, did not need gratitude—she needed 'duros,' without which Javiera could not remain. So after giving the poor child plenty of good advice, and promising to remember her in our saintly prayers, we threw her back to the lions. Javiera never returned; nor can I say exactly what happened to her, but I have every reason to fear that her childhood came to an abrupt and terrible end during those fatal months, while her six mothers in Christ were disporting themselves on the Pacific shores; for one day, during recreation, when Sœur Dionysia asked for news of the unhappy child, our chaste Rosa Mystica coldly bade her never again to mention the wretched girl, whose name was not fit to be pronounced by virginal lips. Her cruel, callous words went like a dagger through my heart, yet I have great hopes that Cupertina, who ruled the Central Americas with a rod of iron, regulated the unhappy child's affairs, for, to my intense joy,

I overheard the older pupils talking of Javiera's wedding, which had taken place in Managua's principal church, during which that universal, most benevolent 'Tia' stood grim, watchful, silent, on the altar steps, guarding with eyes of lynx the interests of the motherless girl and her unborn babe.

Oh, those delightful holidays! We bathed by moonlight, we rode in the cool of the evening, we wandered through virgin forests, we visited ancient Aztec temples and Indian ruins; we lay on the beach at nightfall and looked up to a starry sky such as Europeans only dream of, while the mellow, silvery moonbeams danced on the murmuring waves and made the night as light as day. We caught tortoises and ate their eggs, turtles and made soup of them. Our staple fare consisted of the most luscious fruit—fragrant pineapples, bananas that melted as soon as they passed our lips, juicy mangoes and oranges. Oh, those oranges! Grass-green skins as thin as tissue paper, and filled to overflowing with a dark red liquid of most delicious flavour. We picked them up at our feet, and understood why natives refused to work.

Then came trouble! And with it the end. The European mail was brought us by a priest on horseback. To my surprise it contained the first letter I had received from my mother, since the day she refused me five shillings towards the novice mistress's birthday. I recognised the well-known, yet rarely seen writing, before the envelope left the priest's hand. Mère Rosa opened it, as the rule prescribes, but understanding no English and utterly indifferent to me and my concerns, she

threw it over without comment. I took it with beating heart; it was longer than any I had yet received from my mother, nor did she ever write but to give me unwelcome news. In three closely-written pages she explained that father had lost big sums of money in various law-suits, as well as on the Stock Exchange. He intended giving up business, and what little money remained must be set aside for their old age. My sisters were all married, my brothers earning their own living, it was surely time for a well-educated young woman of three-and-twenty to follow their example. In one word I must no longer expect the yearly hundred she sent to the convent on my behalf.

In point of fact not a penny of that hundred ever benefited me. It went straight into the nuns' pockets, while I worked for them on an average twelve hours a day, even before I entered the novitiate. In return, they gave me two good meals daily, a tiny sleeping cubicle, and new clothes about every five years. For the rest, I never complained, was never ill, never asked or received special care, doctor's or dentist's attendance; so on the whole, there seemed to be plenty of justice and good sound common-sense contained in mother's letter. She quite correctly surmised that I was giving a great deal more than I received, but had she forgotten the bargain she struck with the nuns I fear so. But what about the nuns? Would they also forget?

They did not. Three months later the Neuill Council wrote to inquire why Sœur Miriam's family failed to send the quarterly allowance

Mère Rosa Mystica sharply and tartly interviewed me, thus hearing all about the letter. I concluded by saying that my sense of justice forced me to side with my mother. It was perfectly fair that the old people should keep the little that remained for their declining years. I was young, I was healthy—I could work. I did work, I broadly hinted, harder than any other member in the Community.

Mère Rosa Mystica shrugged her shoulders. That might be, she agreed; but my mother had struck a bargain with the Incarnation of her own free will. If she failed to keep her side of the transaction, they could not be expected to keep theirs. However, that did not concern her (Rosa Mystica); I had better return to Europe and settle the question with the Neuilly big council, as that sacred and mighty body alone decided on such matters.

‘Go all the way to Paris,’ I queried in amazement, ‘to settle about a dowry I haven’t got to give them?’

‘Yes,’ she hastily returned. ‘I must have somebody to take Sœur Marie Dora back to Europe, and you are old enough and intelligent enough to manage her.’

I forgot to mention that six months previously, the Neuilly mother-house sent us three Spanish lay-sisters, of whom one—Sœur Marie Dora—went off her head in quite a harmless, inoffensive sort of way. We kept her shut up in a room behind the ‘lingerie’ where she had plenty of fresh air, good food, clean clothes, pleasant occupation, and kindly

loving care. No miserable prisoner lying on fetid straw, covered with festering sores, starved on stagnant water and mouldy bread, was to be found behind Incarnation walls. My nuns would not actively have ill-treated a mangy dog, let alone a fellow-creature. But such choir-nuns and pupils who could not pay, such lay-sisters and outdoor servants who could not or would not work, must go in double quick time—so Sœur Dora and myself were both doomed, like our illustrious Juan, who often came whimpering to our door in search of ‘pan dulce,’ but who got nothing but a few sharp words from Sœur Rosette, as he only too well deserved.

‘Who will give my classes when I am gone?’ I asked. ‘I give more lessons than any of the others, and as it is, we can hardly manage.’

‘The Easter holidays begin the day your ship sails, and I intend them to last until the end of June,’ explained Mère Rosa, to whom schooltime and holiday must have appeared very similar, as she spent them both swinging in an easy chair. ‘At the end of June the eight new sisters from Malaga, San Sebastian, and Neuilly will have arrived. We shall then have plenty of teachers, all the more as I intend getting rid of several children, whose parents pay irregularly. You see, Sœur Miriam, the Incarnation has plenty of workers. It is money we need: you will have to make that very clear to your family.’

Of my return journey, I will say but little. We travelled *via* New York, had no quarantine, and reached Neuilly in less than a month. We sat

on deck all day—I and the mad sister, who, as far as I could judge, differed little from the rest of us wise virgins, except that she behaved with vastly more decorum. I read all day—mostly Dickens, Lytton, and Mark Twain, who were well represented on board our ship. This time I read without remorse or shame, for I understood that Jesus only wanted rich brides, and intended ridding Himself of the poor ones, without troubling the divorce courts.

CONCLUSION

THERE remains little to say of the last three months I spent among these business-like, money-coining, celestial virgins. At Neuilly, I met neither Mère Agnès de l'Agneau Immolé, nor Mère Clara de l'Amour Mystique, nor Mère Magdalena de Jésus Dolent, who were all three recuperating in various parts of the globe. Madame l'Économe told me in a few cold words that Lyons needed a temporary teacher for their second division, as the usual one lay ill. I was to finish my two years' professed novitiate there. In August—well, they would see. Possibly my father's business affairs might have righted themselves by then, and my quarterly allowance—plus arrears—turn up at the right time. I looked doubtful, but held my peace.

I found at Lyons some fifteen nuns, the youngest of whom would never see forty-five again, whose sole object in life appeared to consist in petting, mothering, nursing, and coddling a charmingly pretty Superior of thirty-six, who looked eighteen. Mère Lisette de Jésus Bébé had, in spite of her thirty-six years, a pink and white round baby face where dimples played bo-peep round a mouth that alternately pouted or showed its pearly teeth in

an adorable smile. During recreation her fifteen worshippers discussed her health, her pretty face, her likes, her dislikes, her desires and wants. They squabbled as to who should sit next to her, fetch her shawl, her 'chauffrette' (foot-warmer), and otherwise attend on her manifold wants. On an average she stayed in bed three days out of the seven, to be nursed and fed on tit-bits.

For all her puling baby ways, she differed utterly from Mère Mystica in that she possessed a very decided will of her own. The sisters might love her, nurse her, make a pet of her; but they must also work, and she made it very clear to all that, she alone was Superior and meant to remain so. School discipline was strictly adhered to, and though we enjoyed plenty of red-letter days and high junkets as at Neuilly, on ordinary days we had to keep the rules and be very careful not to lower ourselves in the esteem of the pupils and outsiders. Mère Rosa Mystica's great mistake consisted in allowing seculars and pupils to overrun the Community at all hours, so that they heard us quarrel, and observed us when we were off our guard. The Neuilly superiors and Mère Lisette de Jésus Bébé had far too much sense to commit so great an error. Also our Lyons convent was in truth a model house, where everyone worked and obeyed, except our pretty kittenish Superior, who spent her days playing with a toy terrier as pretty and fluffy as herself.

How they worshipped her—this attractive babyish woman, who could show very sharp claws when put out! Also no one, herself excepted, not

even I, though only three-and-twenty, was allowed to be childish. One day two young ladies of forty-six and forty-eight respectively, Sœur Gertrude and Sœur Elisée, quarrelled bitterly with each other over a much coveted seat at sweet Mère Lisette's side. Sœur Elisée had exultantly seized it, when a lay-sister called her away for some few minutes. During her absence, Sœur Gertrude sneakingly glided into her vacant chair. She returned to sulk, to whimper, to expostulate. Her grumbling got on Mère Lisette's nerves, and the latter remonstrated with her; which so upset the luckless Elisée that she withdrew to a corner and sulked till bedtime.

Another time the whole community were picking the stalks off some thirty pounds of strawberries, preparatory to making jam, when one Sœur Marie Julienne thoughtlessly cried out: 'Oh, ma mère; Sœur Rosa mustn't touch the fruit. Her hands perspire so dreadfully.'

Furiously Sœur Rosa threw down the strawberry she held, and in spite of her forty-nine years she fled sobbing from the room, also to sulk till bedtime. But Mère Lisette only allowed two babies in the Community, herself and Mademoiselle Fifine, the toy terrier, so Sœur Rosa like Sœur Elisée got soundly rated, which made them sulk and cry the more, for all they richly deserved the dressing-down they received.

Then came the end. June arrived and Mère Lisette was summoned to Neuilly to assist at the 'Grand Chapter' composed solely of Superiors and their assistants. All 'Grand Chapters' were very

solemn affairs, but this one was to outshine the others, as the sun outshines the moon, for a new Mother General had to be elected, in place of the dear old foundress, who was now quite imbecile. I did not assist at the celebrations; but heard all about them later on from a professed novice, who afterwards left the Order. The whole thing was excruciatingly funny. Superiors and assistants met in solemn, thrice solemn, conclave. The proceedings were conducted with such pomp as might have been used if the welfare of Europe had depended on them—and yet the result was simply to place one old maid at the head of other old maids.

Three candidates—Mère Catherine, Mère Marguerite, and that Iberian-Caledonian celestial of whom Rosa Mystica and Rosette everlastingly talked in far-off Nicaragua—presented themselves. After much fussing and bickering, Mère Marie de l'Epoux Céleste obtained the majority of votes amid general rejoicings. Then nuns, lay-sisters, novices—so my informant told me—fell sobbing with joy on one another's necks, exhorting each other to thank the Lord for His wonderful goodness in giving them such a remarkable Mother General. All day and every day the entire Community, swelled to the number of three hundred, hysterically wept with emotion and gratitude at having been elected from all Eternity to be Incarnation nuns; at having been raised, exalted, elevated above all other creatures, nuns, orders.

Mère Marie de l'Epoux Céleste began her seven years' absolute reign by sending the nuns she did not favour to distant houses, or giving them

unimportant offices, while she gave all the most important posts to her pets. Thus she chose a little novice, a most beloved child of hers, one Marie Gloria, as her secretary and confidential help. This pert little person, who had scarcely reached the mature age of one and twenty, travelled with the new General from house to house, when the latter made her yearly rounds of inspection; and gave herself such airs, lorded it over the older nuns, and even local superiors, to such an extent, and puffed herself in so ludicrous a manner, that though the nuns began by being furious, they had to finish by laughing.

Also Rosa Mystica, another prime favourite of Mère Céleste, by now heartily sick of 'Juntas,' doñas, and heat, was recalled and named Superior of Madrid, the post having just been left vacant by Céleste herself; so the poor codfish, though far less capable of ruling than Mademoiselle Fifine, found herself at the head of the second most important house of the Order—but this time, at her own special pleading, Rosette did not accompany her.

My little affairs were dispatched in the twinkling of an eye. The Neuilly Économe on being questioned told the big council that nothing had been heard of Miriam's family for the last twelve months, and not a penny had been sent.

'Very good!' said Mère Céleste over her shoulder to Mère Lisette de Jésus Bébé. 'When you return to Lyons, put the girl into a black frock, give her a couple of sovereigns and send her back to her people. The novitiate is full to overflowing. It is money we want, not teachers.'

Mère Lisette returned, and the first look she bestowed on me, I knew my fate had been sealed. But I could not get within speaking distance of her for the next few days, as Mademoiselle Ffine and the fourteen worshippers nearly suffocated her with caresses.

On the following Monday she called me to her room, and there with many a sweet, honeyed word, told me that the whole thing had been a mistake. Jesus never had chosen me from among millions to be his bride. He never had elected me from all eternity to take rank among the favoured virgins who follow the Lamb, while the redeemed souls of despised seculars, held back and policed by the nine angelic choirs, look on from a respectful distance, something like the mob peeping over the policeman's shoulder on Coronation day. In one word, that for all Jesus and Mary loved their little Miriam, they just loved her with the ordinary love they bestow on all mankind, but had no intention of raising her from the herd.

'That means they are willing to raise me, with the hundred pounds; but not without.'

'Don't be sacrilegious, Miriam,' said my shocked Superior.

'Still, the fact remains that you have nothing to reproach me with, save my father's failure in the City.'

'Oh, I'm not so sure about that,' she hastened to reply. 'You can be very insolent at times. You are violent-tempered and sharp-tongued. You argue and contradict in a way hardly becoming to so young a girl.'

'I did all that three years ago,' I bluntly

retorted. 'But then my father gave you one hundred pounds a year, now he gives nothing.'

All this was so unanswerable, that from sheer inability to find something to say, she remained silently stroking the soft white fur of Mademoiselle Fifine's coat; while that canine young lady sat on her lap with cocked ears, and regarded me disdainfully. For was I not about to be cast forth into outer darkness and gnashing of teeth, while she remained inside the hallowed walls, an honoured and much-loved inmate? After a moment Mère Lisette spoke again hesitatingly and apologetically:

'Perhaps Our blessed Lord wishes you to go because you have not got the spirit of the Incarnation.'

'Not got the spirit of the Incarnation! not got "notre esprit."' How many times had I heard those truly awful words addressed to one or the other candidate, postulant or novice of whom the Order wished to rid itself! Not to have 'notre esprit' meant to be doomed in this world and in the next. It was a great boast of Incarnation nuns that they turned away candidates by the hundreds, 'because' they proudly informed them, 'you have not got "notre esprit."'

I laughed. 'I had "notre esprit" for five long years, then I lost it the day father lost his money. The spirit with which I am to be animated depends solely on the rise and fall of the money market.'

Again she remained silent. How could anyone argue with me, I was so atrociously plausible. I rose to go. 'I am ready,' said I; 'aye, ready and willing. I have long since recognised the

absurdity, the shallowness, the humbug of religious life. I stayed on because of my helplessness and inexperience of the world. Now that Fate has decreed that I must at last stand on my own feet and face that world of which I know nothing, I feel more joy than fear. I have been a coward to this day, now I will be brave.'

She looked at me anxiously. 'You will not stay in Lyons and seek to harm me?' she whimpered. 'After all it is not I who am sending you away. I would much rather keep you than Sœur Fourier who has come to replace you. You are young and active, you know how to manage the children, and in spite of your youth, you are an excellent teacher. But it is not for me to decide. I am only a local Superior, bound to obey the new General. I fancy many of us will live to rue this election.'

'I fancy so too,' said I, thoughtfully pulling Fifine's ears. 'And I do not think dear old Chérubin de Jésus would have bundled me out because the money failed to turn up.'

'But Mère Chérubin de Jésus has no longer a voice in Chapter, as she is completely in her dotage,' Lisette reminded me. 'Mère Marie de l'Epoux Céleste is sole mistress for the next seven years, and if she says that you must go, or your father must pay, it will have to be, my little Miriam.'

'My father won't pay, and I think he is quite right. One hundred a year is colossal, considering the amount of work you got out of me, for I was teaching some ten hours a day even a year before I took the cap. Still I won't complain, I am but too willing to go.'

‘But promise first not to stay in Lyons and harm me, Miriam,’ she again implored. ‘Already we have so many enemies, and Government everlastingly threatens us.’

‘I am not going to stay in Lyons at all, nor yet in France. I intend returning to England, where you will one day follow me, when your long-suffering Republic has had enough of you. Nor shall I seek to harm you in the way you suggest. Yet a day may come when I shall take up my pen and write about you “Incarnation Ladies” and your little peculiarities, and if I do I promise to give Mademoiselle Fifine a place of honour in my work, and thus send her down to an admiring posterity.’

With this parting shaft, I left her. Twenty-four hours later I emerged through a side door into the streets of Lyons, and—for the first time in my life—found myself alone and free in the wide world: dazed, bewildered, perplexed—yet happy. The streets of Lyons were in an uproar which beggars description, for it was the 24th of June 1894, and a few hours previously President Carnot had fallen under the assassin’s knife. Everywhere mounted police and military with drawn sabres tried to thrust back the howling, raging mob, who swore to kill every Italian, who fell into its clutches.

I knew nothing of the portentous event which then electrified the whole world. We did not read papers in the Convent. We considered them neither decent nor mystical—which latter they certainly are not. So in my innocence I concluded that this bacchanalian uproar constituted the habitual state of historical, ancient Lyons. To

make quite sure, however, I stopped a working woman, wedged close up to me by the dense crowd and naïvely asked if anything out of the ordinary had taken place that afternoon. She gazed at my cropped head, my dazed, Rip van Winkle, expression, my halting, uncertain manner in wondering suspicious silence, as well she might ; then shouted back over her shoulder, as she turned away :

‘Eh bien ! d’où sortez-vous donc ? Vous voyez bien que nous les emballons,* ces cochons d’anarchists.’

I still stood pondering over her cryptic words, when a newspaper urchin tumbled into my arms. Oh, welcome sight. He awoke memories in my breast. I hastened to purchase a *Courrier du Soir* ; for with kindly forethought Mère Lisette had placed a few coppers and small silver coins in my jacket pocket, while the purse containing the three gold pieces lay in an inner one.

Having extricated myself from the crowd, I found a quiet churchyard, where—seated on a tombstone I read my *Courrier*. Thus I learnt why Lyons screamed and vociferated, fought and yelled like a tipsy maniac, while, lying in state at the Hôtel de Ville, was the body of the murdered president. Handcuffed, and in irons at the town prison, sat Caserio, a smooth-faced lad in his teens, sulky and surly, unrepentant and blasphemous, hardened in sin in spite of his great youth, to await his certain doom, the sinister guillotine.

The *Courrier* also gave me another item of news, which filled my British heart with keen

* Street slang for ‘to get at,’ ‘to do for.’

rejoicing. On its second page I read how in far-distant Sheen a boy had been born that very morning—a boy who would one day wear the crown of England, and sit on England's throne. Little Edward of York—now our seventeen-year-old Prince of Wales—had just arrived to gladden his great-grannie's heart. Having thus mastered the current news of the world in which, henceforth, I was to live, I rose to my feet, and then set off blithely to find my way to London. I was aided, hustled, thrown from hand to hand like a bale of unclaimed goods, by kindly sergeants, sympathetic porters, amiable station-masters to whom—each one in turn—I, with delightful candour and utmost simplicity like Gilbert à Becket's inamorata of old, uttered the one mystic word: *Londres*. Thus I found myself thirty hours later, I know not how, amid the din and uproar of Victoria Station.

Walking as one in her sleep, I followed the crowd into the noisy street, and thus I passed into that unknown world to sink or swim as best I could.

THE END

